The World of Musical Theatre from the West End to Broadway and beyond

MUSICALS

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The 20 best shows of 2023

Elaine Paige hails Lloyd Webber's rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar

Beverley Knight

The soul diva and Musical Theatre star on her new recording and Sister Act revisited

Plus!

Oh yes they are! Why the stars of Musical Theatre are flocking to panto

Recording reviews
Including
Sweeney Todd, Rachel Tucker and a remixed Sound of Music

Live show listings
West End, Broadway, regional, touring and international

Live show reviews
Including
The Time Traveller's Wife, Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends and Sunset Boulevard

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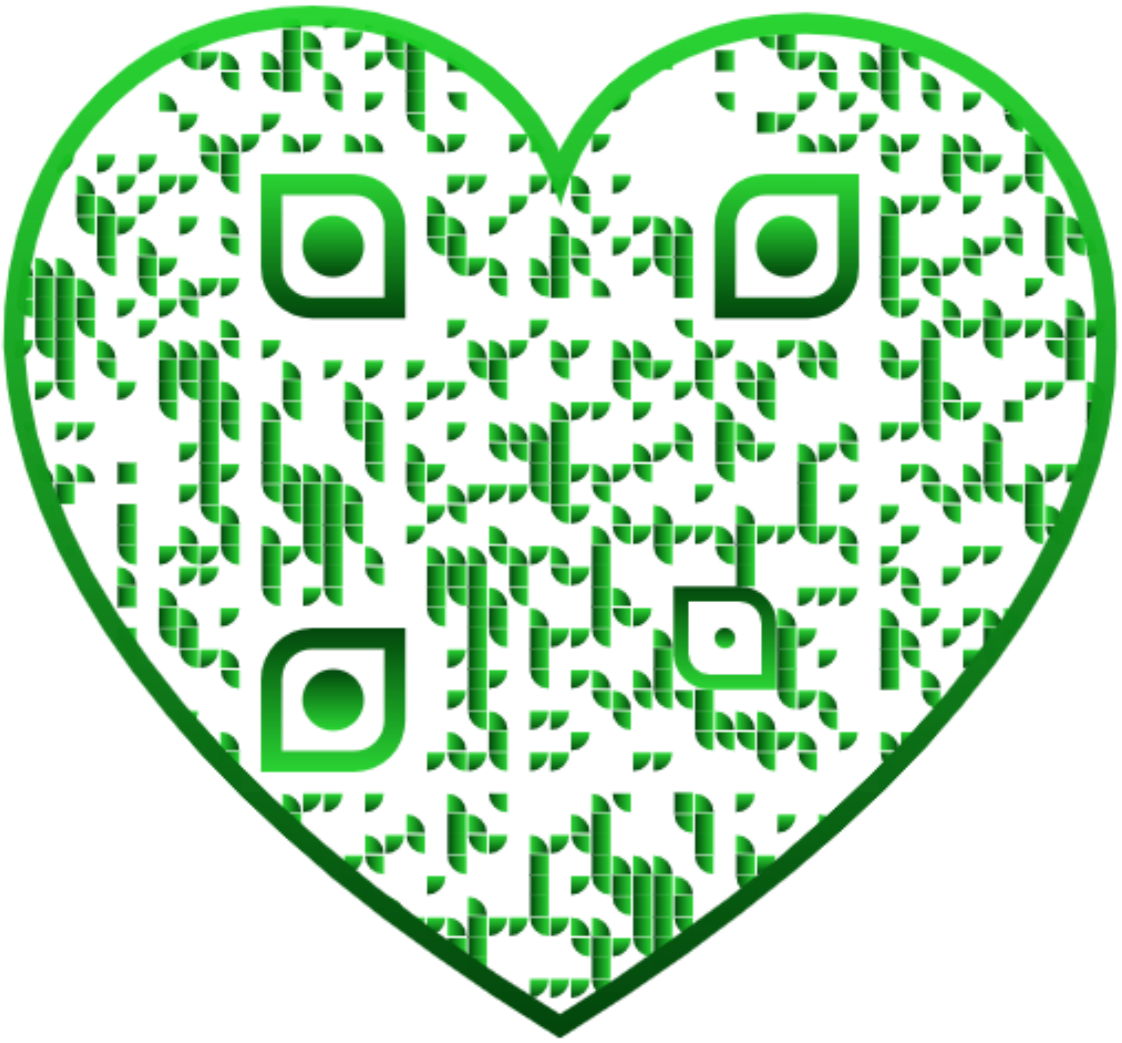
December 2023/January 2024 #6 £6.95



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MUSICALS is published by
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ISSN 2753-4073

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COVER IMAGES: Nicky Johnston / Julian Broad / Barry Rivett / Danny Kaan

When artists don't limit themselves, we all benefit

Recently, I had the pleasure of chatting to multi-hyphenate artist Maimuna Memon about her award-winning *Manic Street Creature* (you can read the interview on our website, and our report of the show on page 15). One thing struck me when I spoke to her: her unwillingness to be labelled. 'You don't have to focus on one thing,' she told me – and her career as a singer-songwriter, theatre composer and Musical Theatre performer (how could anyone not have fallen in love with her as Nikki in *Standing at the Sky's Edge*?) absolutely reflects this. She won't be reprising said role when *Sky's Edge* makes its West End transfer because, as she told me: 'I'm thinking about the next thing I want to write' (she is, among other things, the composer-lyricist of the play *Portia Coughlan*, which has just finished an acclaimed run at the Almeida).

I was reminded of Memon's refusal to be limited when I saw Rachel Tucker live at Cadogan Hall earlier this month, performing a solo concert to launch her new album on Westway Music (see our review on page 69). Tucker is currently surpassing all expectations as the Alternate Norma Desmond in Jamie Lloyd's thrilling take on *Sunset Boulevard* (read our double review on page 54). Yet here she was, belting out arrangements of classic pop/rock hits by Imagine Dragons and The Rolling Stones, alongside a heart-breaking 'He's My Boy' from *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*, addressed to her adorable 10-year-old son Ben in the audience who had previously joined her onstage to play drums (brilliantly) for 'Uptown Funk'. This concert (and the corresponding album) is a celebration of everything Tucker unapologetically is: a bona fide Musical Theatre performer, both in the West End and on Broadway, but also a singer who grew up singing in the pubs and clubs of Belfast with her musician dad, and who cites Tina Turner, among others, as a major influence.

Perhaps it's something that happens as we get older: we become braver at being our authentic selves. As our fabulous cover star Beverley Knight says to Matt Wolf (see page 24), 'You get to your fifties and you're like, "I am the all-conquering hero".' Even the indomitable Knight has had her doubts in the past, particularly when it came to crossing over to Musical Theatre: 'I didn't know how one would make the jump,' she admits. Yet make that jump she has, recently winning an Olivier for *Sylvia*, and now making a joyful return to *Sister Act*. At the same time, the 'Queen of Soul' has not forgotten her roots, as witness her new album 'The Fifth Chapter' which Fiona Mountford applauds as 'a paean to female self-acceptance' (see our review on page 68).

Embracing one's roots is also what pantomime – or 'panto' as we Brits like to call it – is all about. Love it or loathe it, these seasonal productions are part of our Christmas tradition and, moreover, are what keeps the theatre ecosystem afloat. As composer Vikki Stone says in our feature (see page 36): 'Panto pays the bills because more people come to see it than anything else.' But it's not just about the money. Panto is an opportunity for a creative team to change our perception of the genre, with composers like Stone and Tom Self writing original songs that can help advance the narrative more effectively than shrewdly placed pop songs. We're also increasingly seeing high-profile Musical Theatre performers starring in pantos up and down the country; and while this may encourage people to buy tickets, it's also an opportunity for the performers themselves. Why shouldn't Carrie Hope Fletcher, for example, enjoy a career that started with *Les Mis* and continues with *Sleeping Beauty* this December? Could there be a better encapsulation of Memon's refusal to be pigeon-holed? As performer Vivien Parry tells us, panto is a chance to be 'a bit more of a showgirl'. And should anyone dare to question her about any 'irregularity' in transitioning from *Cabaret* to *Dick Whittington*, I can imagine her response might echo Fraulein Schneider's: 'So what?'

Whether or not you make it to panto this year, I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas. And if you're still looking for the perfect gift, why not consider an annual subscription to *Musicals* magazine?

Sarah.

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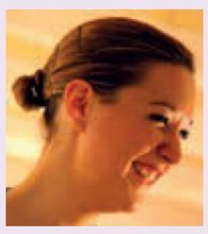
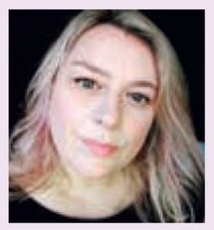
INTRODUCING THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS...



London-based arts journalist and critic **Marianka Swain** writes about theatre, dance, film, TV, books and more for publications such as The Daily Telegraph, The i Paper and London Theatre. She is also the Telegraph's regular Strictly Come Dancing correspondent, and she previously acted as Musicals magazine's assistant editor. Discover her Top 20 2023 shows on page 42 and her live reviews on pages 54 and 59.

Claire Allfree is a London-based arts journalist and critic specialising in theatre and books. She is a regular contributor to The Daily Telegraph, The Times and other high-profile publications. You can read her witty and insightful article about Roald Dahl and Musical Theatre, in which she meets with cast members of the National Theatre's new version of The Witches, on page 30.



Ruth Deller is a freelance writer and entertainment critic, and an academic in the Department of Culture and Media at Sheffield Hallam University. Outside of work, she is actively involved in the local theatre scene and also enjoys cooking, playing board games and going to the cinema. You can read her reviews of Jesus Christ Superstar and To Wong Foo on pages 49 and 57.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: Nicky Johnston / Julian Broad / Mark Senior / Danny Kaan

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Curtain Up!

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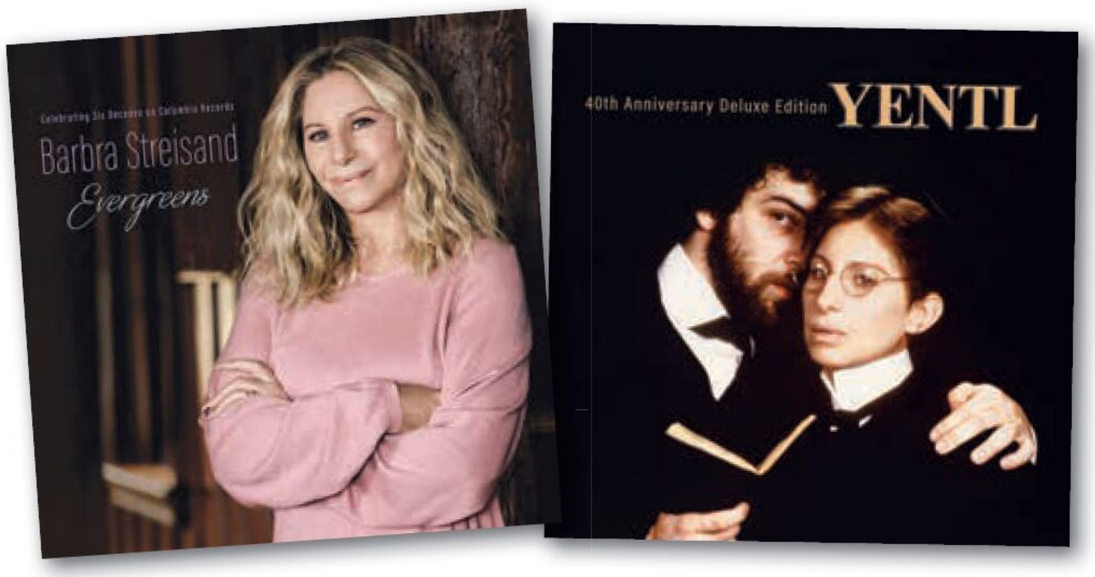
Barbra Streisand: A Star is (Re)Born



Hello, gorgeous readers! Treat the Barbra Streisand fan in your life (or yourself) this festive period with the greatest star's hotly anticipated memoir *My Name is Barbra* and two special albums: 'Evergreens: Celebrating Six Decades on Columbia Records' and *Yentl* (40th Anniversary Deluxe Edition).

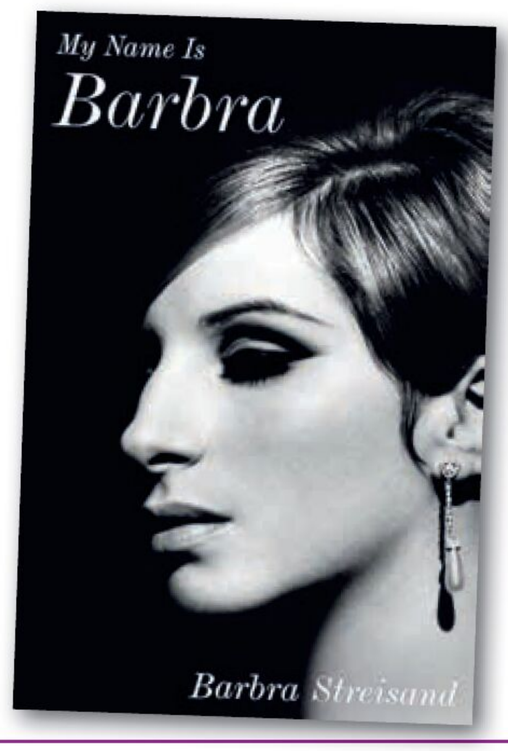
Never one to do anything by halves, Streisand has written a doorstop of a memoir that's almost 1000 pages long and runs at over 48 hours on audio (read by Streisand herself). The tome charts Streisand's difficult upbringing in Brooklyn, the sexism that she experienced throughout her career, her political advocacy, and relationships with many famous friends. It also profiles, of course, her fabulous career success with 150 million records sold, and multiple awards given, including nine Golden Globes, four Emmys and two Oscars (for acting and songwriting) – all motivated by her insatiable drive and perfectionism.

The New York Times hails the memoir as 'glorious, exuberant, chatty and candid, a victory lap past all who ever doubted, diminished or dissed her, with lingering high-fives for the many supporters'. What better companion could there be for these dark winter nights?

At the ripe age of 20, Streisand began her association with Columbia Records when she recorded 'The Barbra Streisand Album'. This marked the start of a prolific recording career, and 'Evergreens' features personally selected tracks from some 60 years of artistic growth. None of these songs, aside from 'Evergreen', have featured on previous compilation albums.

With 2023 also marking 40 years since the release of Streisand's personal passion project *Yentl*, a deluxe album set has now been released. *Yentl* was a landmark for Streisand, who, with it, became the first woman to write, produce, direct and star in a major motion picture. This new release features all the songs from the original soundtrack by Michel Legrand (with lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman), plus a bonus disc of demos recorded in Streisand's living room with Legrand at the piano.

'My Name is Barbra' is published by Penguin, and 'Evergreens' and Yentl are released on Legacy Recordings – all are available now



JERSEY BOYS RELEASED ON VINYL

More Christmas present ideas! Rhino Records and Arts Music have released a truly covetable vinyl edition of **Jersey Boys: Original Broadway Cast Recording**. The original CD won the 2007 Grammy Award for Best Musical Show Album and has been certified platinum. With the London production closing on 4 January, this would be the ideal gift for die-hard *Jersey Boys* fans.

Sony Masterworks Broadway, meanwhile, has released the New Broadway Cast Recording of the first-ever Broadway revival of Sondheim's **Merrily We Roll Along**. Starring Daniel Radcliffe, Jonathan Groff and Lindsay Mendez, the score features some of Sondheim's most celebrated and personal songs.

Another cult favourite, **Kimberly Akimbo**, is once again being celebrated by Ghostlight Records. Following the soundtrack's success on Billboard's Cast Album chart when it was released on CD and in digital and streaming formats earlier this year, a two-LP vinyl edition will be released on 12 January. Led by Tony Award winner Victoria Clark, the show boasts music by Jeanine Tesori, who this year became the first woman to win two Tonys for Best Score.

And finally, from the West End, the London Concept Album of composer Frank Wildhorn's manga musical **Death Note: The Musical** is also forthcoming from Ghostlight Records. Following 10 sold-out concerts at the London Palladium and the Lyric Theatre, the album will feature the stars of the original Palladium show, including Adam Pascal, Joaquin Pedro Valdes, Dean John-Wilson and Aimie Atkinson. Look out for reviews of some these exciting recordings in upcoming issues of *Musicals*.

Epic cast takeovers line up on Broadway

Wait, what's your rush, what's your hurry? Aaron Tveit and Sutton Foster are preparing to star in **Sweeney Todd** at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre as the title role and Mrs Lovett for a limited 12-week run from 9 February. Tveit was most recently seen on Broadway as Christian in *Moulin Rouge!* and Foster as Marian in *The Music Man*. It's intriguing casting for sure.

Intriguing, too, is the chance to see Boy George, who plays flamboyant club owner Harold Zidler in **Moulin Rouge!** at Al Hirschfeld Theate from 6 February to 12 May. The '80s pop icon was previously seen on Broadway in 2003 in *Taboo*.

Meanwhile, *American Idol* winner Nick Fradiani has taken over as Neil Diamond in **A Beautiful Noise** at the Broadhurst Theatre, and Eden Espinosa will play the eponymous Jazz Age painter in new show **Lempicka** at Longacre Theatre in March, directed by Rachel Chavkin (*Hadestown*).

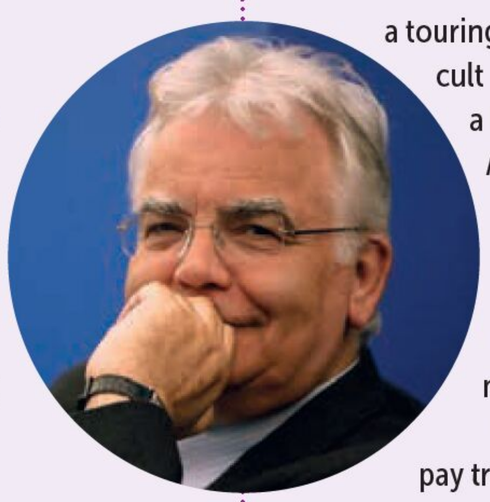
Speaking of *Hadestown* – look out for our feature in the next issue of *Musicals*, and see Interval Chatter (right) for casting.

West End extensions, and Little Big Things

A flurry of West End extensions have been announced. Stalwarts **Les Mis**, **Phantom of the Opera** and **Mamma Mia!** have extended their booking periods to 28 September, and **Wicked** to 15 December. Meanwhile, **The Little Big Things** will play @sohoplace until 2 March; **Operation Mincemeat** at the Fortune Theatre until 15 June; **Guys & Dolls** at the Bridge until 31 August; and **Cabaret** at the Playhouse Theatre (Kit Kat Club) until 28 September (all 2024). You also can groove with **Mamma Mia! The Party** at the O2 until 15 June 2025.

The aforementioned *The Little Big Things*, which features in our Top 20 shows of 2023 (page 42), has had quite a journey since it opened. The cast recently appeared in the Royal Variety Performance at the Royal Albert Hall, to be televised in December, and a cast recording is in the pipeline. It's encouraging to see what's possible for new musicals opening in the West End.

Prolific producer Bill Kenwright dies at 78



Bill Kenwright has died of cancer aged 78. The theatre producer, who passed away on 23 October, began his career as a call boy at Liverpool Playhouse. He then joined the National Youth Theatre and worked as an actor. In 1972, he produced the first major UK touring production of *West Side Story*. Over six decades, he produced innumerable West End, regional and touring productions of musicals and straight plays, often starring well-known television actors.

For many theatregoers, Kenwright – who was made a CBE in 2001 – is synonymous with *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Blood Brothers*, though he wasn't the original producer of either. His production of *Joseph* has regularly toured the UK since the 1980s with spells in the West End, and has been a formative introduction to theatre for many young people. He was a judge on the BBC's 2007 casting show *Any Dream Will Do*. His production of *Blood Brothers*, meanwhile, played for 24 years in the West End and is also a touring fixture. More recently, he co-produced cult musical *Heathers*, which has just ended a long run at The Other Palace. When *Musicals* magazine talked to The Other Palace's Paul Taylor-Mills for 'Day in the Life' (April/May issue), he told us how all the cast auditions took place at Kenwright's office: 'Bill loves auditions more than I do!' he joked.

Rob Madge was one of many artists to pay tribute: 'Thank you Bill for believing in me and my work. Not many men would chair a football club and proudly produce a show celebrating queerness at the same time. I and many others owe so much to him.'

■ **The actress Haydn Gwynne died on 20 October at the age of 66. Gwynne's Musical Theatre credits included *Billy Elliot* (in which she created the role of Mrs Wilkinson), *The Great British Bake Off: The Musical* and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*. A full obituary can be found on our website – visit musicalsmagazine.com**

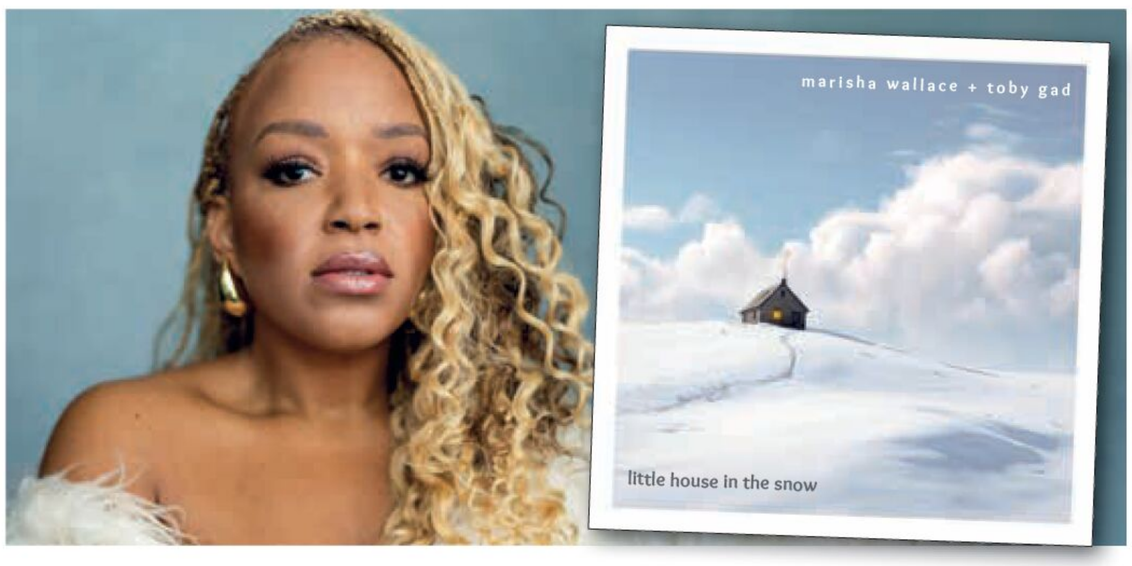
Marisha Wallace dreams of snow this Christmas

Musicals magazine's very first cover star Marisha Wallace has released an original Christmas single, 'Little House in the Snow'. Currently whipping up a storm as Miss Adelaide in Nicholas Hytner's *Guys & Dolls* at the Bridge Theatre, Wallace has still found time to record this gorgeous collaboration with Grammy-winning songwriter Toby Gad, which features Wallace's soulful vocals against a stripped-back piano accompaniment with gentle, soaring strings. It shows Wallace in a more contemplative mood than audiences may be used to seeing: 'I wanted to play with this new side, using a more jazzy, vulnerable voice,' she tells *Musicals*. 'Also, we're so used to the belting songs at Christmas, but this is for those who want something more introspective.'

Wallace understands that Christmas may not be an easy time for everyone – 'but if you have family, it will be OK'. She won't be seeing her own family back in North Carolina until February, but the song recalls how dear they all are to her – especially her mother. Her father wouldn't allow Wallace and her siblings to celebrate Christmas as children, but her mum would hand them secret gifts from a black bin bag, which would then be hidden as soon as their father returned home.

Today, the singer is determined to 'make memories at Christmas that I couldn't make when I was little'. To that end, 'Little House in the Snow', with its repeated line 'Christmas always brings me home', may have bittersweet associations for Wallace but is the perfect soundtrack to wrapping gifts, decorating the tree and spending time with loved ones.

'Little House in the Snow' is available on all streaming platforms via Kite Records



PHOTOGRAPHY: Yellowbellyphoto / Manuel Harlan

Black British Theatre Awards: results 2023

The fifth Black British Theatre Awards were presented at the National Theatre's Lyttelton Theatre on 29 October.

Sylvia, which featured our cover star Beverley Knight, won Best Musical Production, and Sean Green received Best Musical Director for his work on the show. We're also delighted that Michael Ahomka-Lindsay, who was spotlighted as the 'Rising Star' in our April/May issue, won Best Male Lead Actor in a Musical for *Newsies*. Best Female Lead Actress in a Musical was awarded to Elesha Paul Moses for *Tina*.

Elsewhere, Billie-Kay Payne won Best Supporting Female Actor in a Musical for *Annie*; Kyrelle Lammy Best Supporting Male Actor in a Musical for *Nativity!*; and Claudia Kariuki was Non-Binary Performer in a Musical for *SIX*. Cedric Neal (above), currently rocking the boat as Nicely-Nicely Johnson in *Guys & Dolls*, was thrilled to receive the Lord Hastings of Scarisbrick Award.

Interval Chatter

Casting has been revealed for the West End's **Hadestown**. Dónal Finn, Grace Hodgett Young, Zachary James, Melanie La Barrie and Gloria Onitiri will headline the show, to open in February

Drew McOnie has been appointed the new artistic director of Regent's Park Open Air Theatre. He takes over from Timothy Sheader in January 2024

Jason Robert Brown is coming to the London Palladium for one night only on 24 March 2024. The composer will perform selections of his own work, alongside special guest Cynthia Erivo

New British musical **Ride** is stepping up a gear with its US premiere. The hit show opens in San Diego on 30 March

Audience favourite **Michael Ball** is hitting the road with 'On With the Show'. The UK tour runs from 11 to 28 March

Sarah Brightman is making her own comeback as Norma Desmond. Opening in Melbourne in May, Sunset Blvd marks her first theatre role in three decades

Casting has been announced for the **Standing at the Sky's Edge** West End transfer. There are six newbies, among them Laura Pitt-Pulford as Poppy

Ruth Jones will play Mother Superior in Sister Act, alongside Beverley Knight. 'It's a crackin' role and a crackin' show,' said the Gavin & Stacey star

Rachel Tucker and **Louise Dearman** will star in a concert of Side Show at the Palladium in March. Other artists include Bradley Jaden and Tosh Wanogho-Maud

The **Shrek** tour will transfer to the Eventim Apollo in Hammersmith in July. Strictly's Joanne Clifton stars as Fiona

Countdown to...

Opening Night

Laura Pick is excited to revisit Wicked as she swaps London for the show's third UK tour

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matt Crockett

Laura Pick started defying gravity as Elphaba in 2017

How does it feel to be returning to Wicked as Elphaba after almost two years away?
It's exciting to be with a new company and to be exploring new avenues. It's also strange because you're no longer in the swing of it with eight shows a week and have to pick up your script again, a bit like after lockdown, but it's wonderful. I already have lots of friends in the cast and I'm looking forward to making new ones, too.

How do you keep your performance fresh?
I think it naturally grows, performing with different people and covers, but it's always important to go back over Elphaba's story to find new things.

What's your favourite part of the show?
I've always loved 'For Good' because it's such a special moment when Elphaba and Glinda come back together. You really connect with each other, communicating with looks and holding hands. Of course, I also love 'Defying Gravity' and flying!

How do you maintain your stamina with such a demanding role?
You have to do a really solid vocal warm-up that's tailored to you. I've started working with an amazing new teacher, and Alexia Khadime [current West End Elphaba] and I regularly check in with each other about steaming. Stretching is also really important but there's a bit less running on tour because we can't go under the stage like at the Apollo Victoria!

How are you preparing and what are you most looking forward to?
It's my first time touring, so it's important to arrange nice places to stay, where I can rest, hydrate and get a good night's sleep. I can't wait for Christmas in Edinburgh – it's going to be so beautiful. I'm from Wakefield and lots of people I know are coming to see me in Bradford so I'd better be at the top of my game! And, of course, being with Sarah O'Connor who plays Glinda – we first met when she was a dresser at the Apollo Victoria and she's so much fun to be around.

You've had several opening nights as Elphaba. What's your favourite memory?
I'll never forget reopening after lockdown with Sophie Evans as Glinda. We'd had our first ever rehearsals together when we both joined the show back in 2017, so it was very emotional. This time around, opening night will be about giving the best possible show and then going to bed!
As told to Julia Rank

Wicked is touring the UK from 7 December 2023 to 12 January 2025 – to book tickets and for further information, visit wickedthemusical.co.uk

Closing Night

For **Tyrone Huntley**, the demanding role of Che in Evita is one he'll be sad to bid farewell to

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner

The shape-shifting Che is a dream role for Huntley

Tell us about who your character is...
Che is an observer – the conduit between the performance and the audience. But with Eva Perón, he's more her confidante, her conscience. He's what's happening in her head when she's asking herself: 'Am I being true to what I set out to do?'

Director Harold Prince reimagined him as Che Guevara...
We're taking off that layer, and seeing Che as an everyman, a commentator, the conscience of the piece as a whole. For me as an actor, it's a gift because I'm shape-shifting throughout. I can mould to the context of the scene, and that gives me so much freedom.

What's the overall vision of Curve's production?
While it's based on the life and times of Eva Perón, our focus is to bring it into the now, to explain historical events that can be explored through a current lens. For example, you could say that Eva Perón was the first social influencer, who used her celebrity to rally the crowds and propel this unknown military personality into the spotlight. So for Nikolai [Foster, director], it's not so much a historical retelling but a way of using these characters to tell a contemporary story that people can relate to.

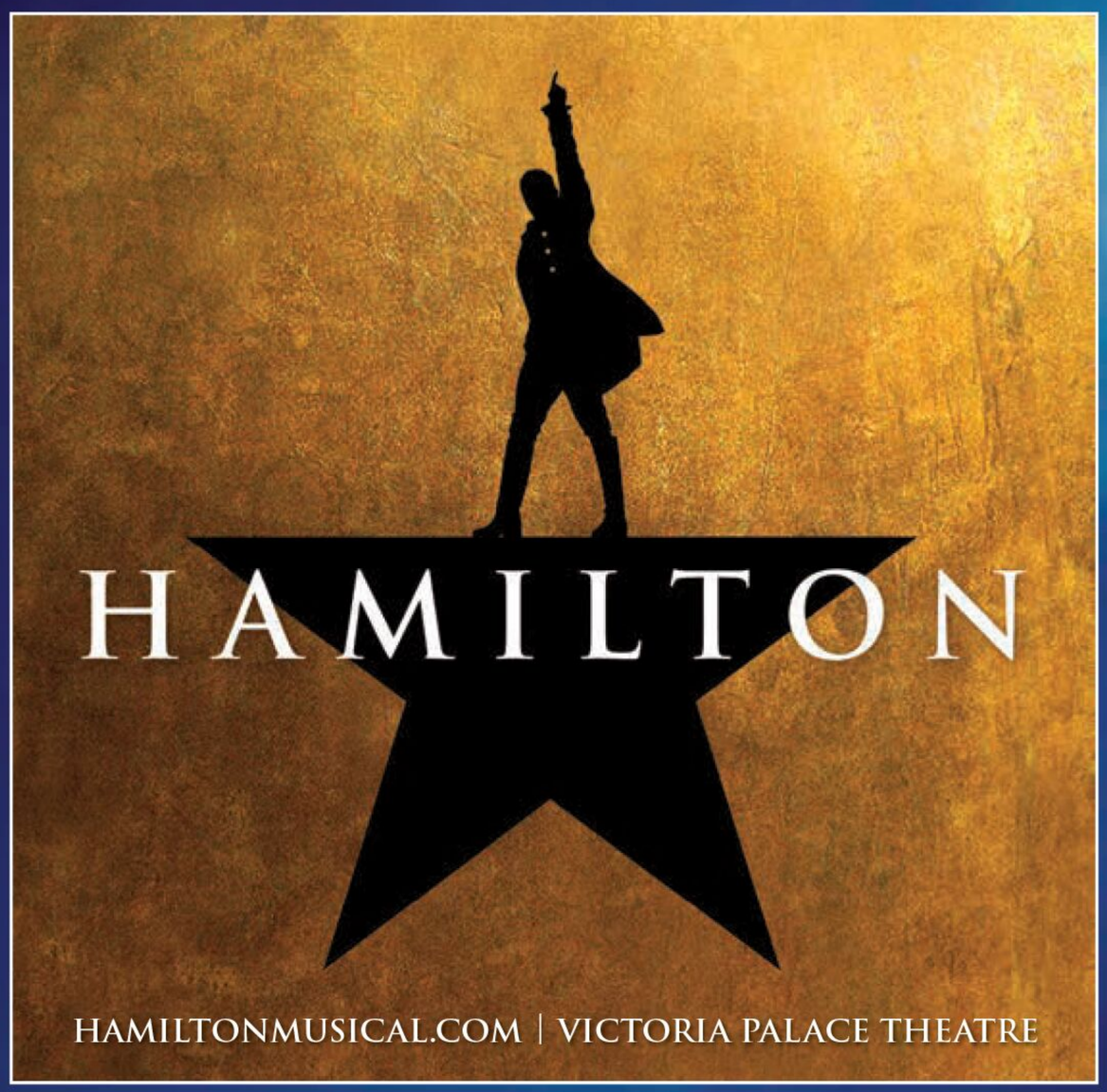
What are the particular challenges for you?
Vocally, this is probably the biggest range I've ever had to sing in a role. Also, Che is onstage for pretty much all of the show, so it's about finding those moments where you can take a breath but still be part of the story.

What makes Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice a winning combination?
Both *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita* were written in the 1970s but they still stand the test of time. When I played Judas [originally at Regent's Park in 2016], I went back to the dots, to the music in its simplest form, and used that as a base for any stylistic choices. I've taken the same approach here – I've had to unlearn a lot of the music I thought I knew and relearn it. For the whole creative team, too, that's been crucial: to honour the writers' original intentions.

What will you miss?
I'd not worked with Martha [Kirby, Eva Perón], or Nikolai, or any of the cast or creative team before, but we bonded immediately. It's always a downer when a show finishes, so I'll miss it all, especially the chance to get creative each night.
As told to Sarah Kirkup

Nikolai Foster's Evita is playing at Curve, Leicester, until 13 January 2024 – to book tickets and for further information, visit curveonline.co.uk

LONDON'S FAVOURITE MUSICALS



VISIT SHOW WEBSITES FOR BEST SEATS AND PAY NO BOOKING FEES

Bring Back That Show!

The Witches of Eastwick

Musicals are often markedly different to their source material and *The Witches of Eastwick* is no exception. In John Updike's disturbing 1984 novel, the three 'witches' are absolutely despicable. They were made much more sympathetic for the all-star 1987 film and more lovable yet for the musical.

With music by Dana P Rowe and lyrics/book by John Dempsey (they also wrote *Zombie Prom* and *The Fix* together), and produced by Cameron Mackintosh, *The Witches of Eastwick* premiered in June 2000 at Theatre Royal Drury Lane and later transferred to the smaller Prince of Wales Theatre (March 2001) in a revised form, running for 17 months in total.

With its witty and vivacious score and a fair amount of racy content, the show could be described as *The Music Man* meets *Desperate Housewives*. It was a refreshing example of musical comedy in a landscape dominated by epic stories in historical settings throughout the '80s and '90s. There was also plenty of spectacle – the Act One finale culminated in that famous flying scene.

Set in a fictional small town in Rhode Island, the three heroines are failed sculptor Alexandra Spofford, repressed cellist Jane Smart and anxious journalist Sukie Rougemont, originally played by Lucie Arnaz, Joanna Riding and Maria Friedman respectively. All are single and lonely and, fuelled by martinis and brownies on a stormy night, they cast a spell to conjure up their dream man – and all sorts of hijinks ensue.

And the Devil himself? Star of TV comedy-drama *Lovejoy* Ian McShane took the role of flashy incomer Darryl Van Horne who seduces the three ladies and brings chaos to Eastwick. But the women are the ones who really matter.

The Witches of Eastwick London concert in 2022

The cast album was one of my most frequently listened-to recordings as a teenager as I found it so empowering. Particular highlights are Arnaz's earthiness and all of Riding's acerbic line readings and her unleashing of Jane's pent-up frustrations in 'Waiting For the Music to Begin'. The harmonies in 'Make Him Mine', 'I Wish I May' and the finale 'Look At Me' are shimmeringly lovely. There are also excellent ensemble numbers, led by Rosemary Ashe as town busybody Felicia Gabriel.

The show has never been performed on Broadway but there was a production at the Signature Theatre in Arlington, Virginia in 2007. It has also been mounted in Australia, the Czech Republic, Brazil and Austria. The show toured the UK in 2008-09; Newbury's Watermill Theatre produced an actor-musician production in 2013, and a one-off concert at the Sondheim Theatre was directed by original cast member Friedman in 2022.

With feminism discussed much more openly in mainstream culture now than in 2000, surely it's time for the witches to fly again?

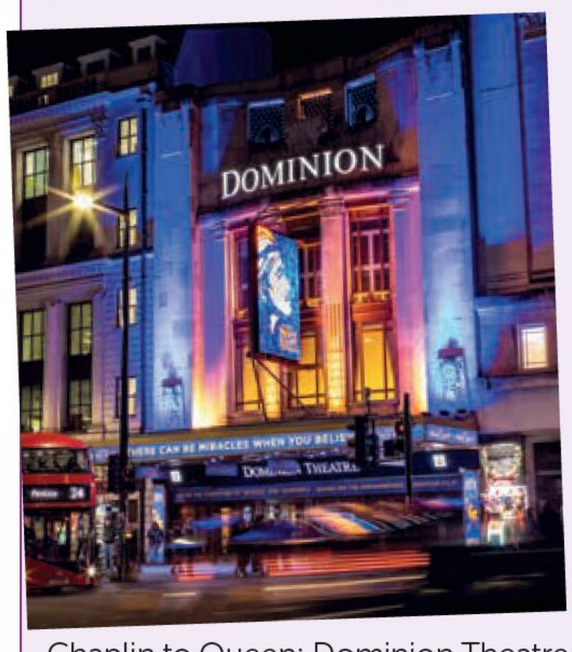
Julia Rank

Venue Focus

Dominion Theatre

Where? Tottenham Court Road, central London.

Significant dates Opened in 1929 with dual licensing for live performances and film screenings but the following year became a cinema only. From 1957, the Dominion alternated films with live concerts. In 1986, the venue returned to its original purpose as a theatrical house with the rock musical *Time*. *We Will Rock You* played for a 12-year run between 2002-2014.



Chaplin to Queen: Dominion Theatre

Architect W & TR Milburn, who were associated with the Moss Empires chain of music halls and variety theatres. The theatre is Renaissance Revival in style and retains its original Art Deco light fittings and plasterwork.

Capacity 2,163

Owner: Nederlander Organisation

About The Dominion is one of largest theatres in the West End, featuring a distinctive red-hued auditorium. The venue has always been at the cutting edge of modern technology.

However, it didn't have the most auspicious opening in 1929, when it presented the unsuccessful *Follow Through*, an American musical comedy about golf.

Transformed into one of London's largest cinemas, the venue hosted the premiere of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931). In 1938, colour television was demonstrated to an audience who watched pictures transmitted from the Crystal Palace.

In the 1950s, the Dominion, with its installation of Todd-AO technology, was *the* place to see Technicolor Hollywood movie musicals in all their glory. Film showings were interspersed with live performance and Judy Garland took up a legendary month-long residency in 1957.

Hollywood glamour gave way to rock and pop in the '70s and '80s, when the Dominion became established as a music venue, hosting artists including David Bowie, Madness and Bon Jovi.

On its restoration as a theatrical house with *Time*, the auditorium was temporarily painted black. Disney stage musical *Beauty and the Beast* was a big hit in the late 1990s but the venue is probably best known for its long run of Queen musical *We Will Rock You*. The statue of Freddie Mercury outside the theatre became a tourist attraction in its own right.

Extensive restoration work has taken place over the past 15 years and the theatre boasts the largest, highest-resolution exterior screen in the West End. Recently, there have been limited runs of *Grease* and *Dirty Dancing*, plus the London premiere of *Elf* (becoming the fastest-selling show in the theatre's history), which returns this Christmas. In the new year, the venue will host *The King and I* starring Helen George, followed by *Sister Act* led by our cover star Beverley Knight, who will be succeeded by Alexandra Burke. In October 2024, the London premiere of *The Devil Wears Prada* will be strutting the boards.

Julia Rank

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Kaan

From the Green Room

How does scale influence Musical Theatre productions? **Edward Seckerson** considers the power of actor-musician productions in bringing intimacy to epic scores and stories

Some Musical Theatre fans have been asking when the actor-musician format, which has grown so prevalent in recent years, moves from being a virtue (or otherwise) born of economic necessity to a creative choice? The small but mighty Watermill Theatre in Newbury, whose part in the evolution of this practice has been immeasurable over the years, would probably argue that economic necessity and creative choice go hand in hand and that a tiny postage-stamp stage is no inhibitor when it comes to embracing this potentially elaborate genre.

In 2004, director John Doyle mounted his now somewhat legendary production of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* at the rustic Berkshire theatre and we all flocked to see it, intrigued by the apparent contradiction of this highly operatic score, born of grand organ-buttressed filmic gestures, and a venue with barely enough room to swing one of Mrs Mooney's soon-to-be-pie-filling pussies. But it was amazing how the atmosphere and scale of the piece – and especially the score – was not diminished by stripping it to the bare bones and driving the musical narrative with a solo cello here, a flute there, a trumpet or a hand drum, all in the capable hands of actors for whom the instruments were an extension of their vocal and physical armaments. We in the audience were in a sense incarcerated in the asylum which became inseparable from the fate of Sweeney's wife and daughter. The effect was extraordinary and chilling – and somehow the sound of this most symphonic of Sondheim's scores remained in our minds' ears.

Other Doyle actor-muso stagings followed *Sweeney* into the Watermill – *Mack & Mabel* and *Merrily We Roll Along* – but his big moment came when the *Sweeney* concept transferred to Broadway with Sondheim's blessing and headlined by Patti LuPone and Michael Cerveris, winning Doyle a Tony Award. But suddenly we were in a big Broadway theatre and the immediacy and claustrophobia (and for me the black humour) evaporated and I saw no reason anymore for the musical minimalism. LuPone's performance was, for me, robbed of the ripeness and comedy which she had displayed so brilliantly in a New York Philharmonic concert staging prior to the Doyle production (still, for my money, the best recorded account of the score). Watching her sport a tuba or a triangle was no substitute for giving free rein to her theatrical instincts. In certain respects she seemed to me to be limited by the Doyle staging.

Doyle later made amends as far as I was concerned when he staged a Broadway account of Sondheim's *Company* where every actor played a musical instrument *except* Bobby – a clever metaphor for his single 'outsider' status. At the end, once he was finally able to take his first step towards commitment, he accompanied himself on the piano. Brilliant. The actor-muso format had once again found dramatic purpose.

There is, of course, a dramatic physical correlation between an actor and a musical instrument. Sometimes the body itself can become a conduit for the most intense and primal expression of emotion – rhythm. In the recent revival of Darren Clark and Jethro Compton's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, the communal stomping which so often underpinned the dramatic impulse of both music and story was positively visceral. Grassroots folk-inflected music can do that and indeed that is the palette from which all Clark's work derives. I am reminded of Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová's *Once* where love is communicated entirely through song. Small wonder that 'Falling Slowly' became a universal serenade for die-hard romantics and sceptics alike.

One of my all-time favourite theatre scores is Howard Goodall's *The Hired Man* which I saw memorably realised in an actor-muso staging at the Queen's Theatre Hornchurch in 2019. And while once more the ethnicity of Northumberland folk music gives the score its flavour, Goodall's composerly aspirations, to say nothing of his beginnings as a choral scholar, take it somewhere else entirely. The finale becomes 'lofty' in the best sense with key themes now building in thrilling choral counterpoint so that the show's humble tunes achieve an inspirational ascendancy. Their reach is now epic.

And the epic can be intimate. When Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens's masterpiece *Ragtime* arrived at the Charing Cross Theatre in 2016, Thom Southerland's actor-muso staging made no concessions to the venue or the soaring aspirations of the score. The immediacy of it all paradoxically extended its reach.

John Doyle had started something. Size really didn't matter. M

Above/below The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, actor-musician style

Sometimes the body itself can become a conduit for the most intense and primal expression of emotion – rhythm

PHOTOGRAPHY: Juan Coolio

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Elaine's Page

Jesus Christ Superstar

As Jesus Christ Superstar tours the UK, **Elaine Paige** looks at how Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's biblical smash brought rock concert energy to Musical Theatre

'Idea: a rock album inspired by a retelling of Jesus's last days on Earth, seen through the eyes of Judas Iscariot.'

It's mind-blowing to think that that's essentially what Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber said to each other, at the ages of 25 and 22 respectively.

That's how *Jesus Christ Superstar* (*JCS*) was born. The nearly 90-minute concept album had to come first, because as Andrew has said since – no producer wanted to put 'the worst idea in history' onstage!

Back then, it may not have set the UK alight, but the daring rock opera record by two virtually unknown guys was a really powerful listening experience, with its full orchestra and gospel choir. Our friends across the pond were captivated. It got to number one in the United States, selling 2.5 million copies.

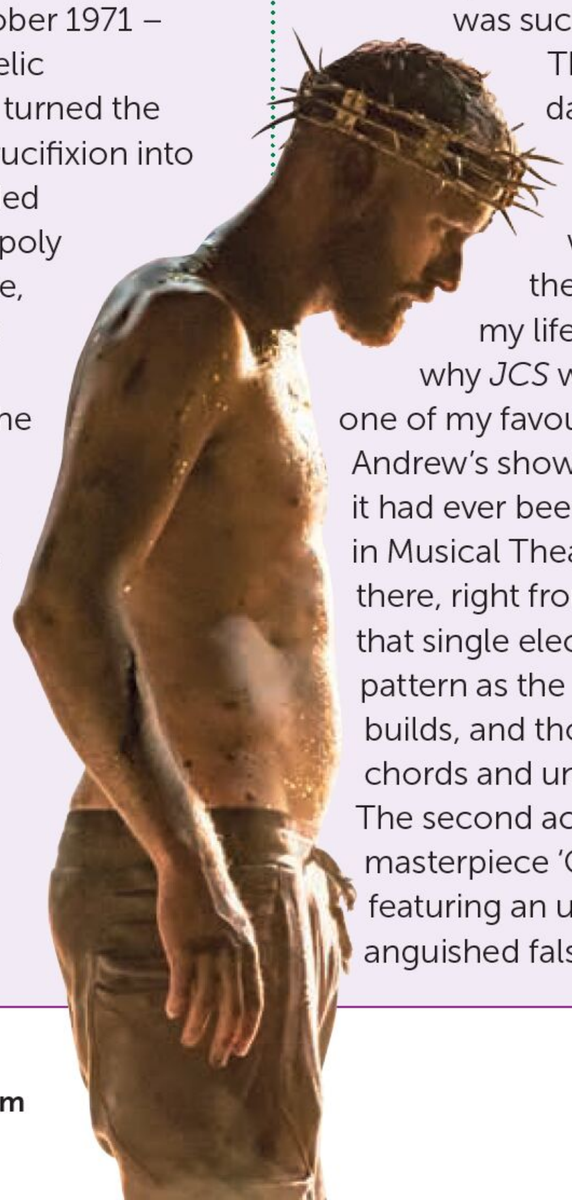
That surprise success led to the green light for a stage adaptation. *JCS* opened a year later on Broadway, in October 1971 – a hectic, psychedelic extravaganza that turned the story of Christ's crucifixion into a spectacle. It ended New York's monopoly on Musical Theatre, spawning a British invasion that ultimately paved the way for mega-musicals like *Les Mis* and *Phantom*.

Reviews of *JCS* were mixed, but a year later it transferred to London's Palace Theatre, having risen above the bristling controversy surrounding some of its themes. It had achieved cult status.

Above/below Jesus Christ Superstar at the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre

The show's London advent was when I first met Andrew. I was in *Rock Carmen*, so couldn't audition for the original cast, but later my pal Diane Langton called me to say she wanted to leave. So I got my chance and, as part of an early recast, I won the role of one of the three Hosanna Angels.

It was the summer of 1972, and the queue for tickets for *JCS* snaked all the way down Shaftesbury Avenue. There was such a buzz.



Those heady days when we were all starting out were some of the happiest of my life – and that's why *JCS* will forever be one of my favourites of Andrew's shows. Nothing like it had ever been heard before in Musical Theatre. It's all there, right from the off, with that single electric guitar pattern as the epic Overture builds, and those discordant chords and unusual rhythms. The second act includes that masterpiece 'Gethsemane', featuring an unforgettable anguished falsetto wail.

Mary Magdalene's ode to Jesus, 'I Don't Know How to Love Him' and the showstopper 'Superstar' boast some of Andrew's greatest melodies. He really was at his most free and wild. A rock oratorio was so him. Tim's lyrics were so witty and innovative: 'Prove to me that you're divine / change my water into wine'. And Tim wasn't afraid of painting Jesus, Judas, Mary, Pilate, Herod and more as three-dimensional human beings.

The explosive original London production lasted more than eight years, becoming the longest-running musical in West End history at the time. Some three years later I recorded 'I Don't Know How to Love Him' for my 'Stages' album – coming full circle.

I've seen many incarnations of *JCS* over the years. It never fails to wow.

The Regent's Park Open Air Theatre production in 2016 made an especially big impression on me. It had a wild rock concert energy that took me right back to the excitement of the original London production, when the whole thing felt so fresh and raw.

I'm delighted that Timothy Sheader's nuanced and moving revival is now on tour. My Palladium panto pal Julian Clary has been playing King Herod at certain performances. I can't wait to see it in Wimbledon.

JCS is the musical master of morphing and updating to fit with the times. And it can only do so because the original material is rock solid and everlasting.

The show's influence is hard to exaggerate. It led to technical advancements, including the miniaturisation of rock concert equipment for the theatre, and mic adaptations that allowed singers to be heard over electric instruments. And it proved you could turn a show that critics didn't particularly like into a hit. But more than that, it pioneered the rock musical genre.

Over half a century later, *Jesus Christ Superstar* still feels thrillingly vivid and alive. It was a privilege to be part of it from its earliest days and it will always have a special place in my affections. After all, we always love the music that we associate with our youth, don't we? Oh, 'Could We Start Again Please'?! M

For more details about the current touring production, visit uktour.jesuschristsuperstar.com; 'Elaine Paige on Sunday' is on BBC Radio 2 at 1pm; follow her on X @elaine_paige

Over half a century later, Jesus Christ Superstar still feels thrillingly vivid and alive. It was a privilege to be part of it

PHOTOGRAPHY: Nicky Johnston / Johan Persson

A Day in the Life of...

Stacey Haynes, director & choreographer

Rehearsals and chilling with members of ABBA... That's just a typical 24 hours for the co-director of Greatest Days, co-director/choreographer of Mamma Mia! The Party and associate director of Elf

Cock-a-(golden)doodle-doo!

Every morning, I'm woken up by my three dogs who don't like to sleep past 7.10am. They're all goldendoodles – the two boys are 13, and the girl is four.

I drag myself out of bed and go downstairs to make their breakfast. I then do 20 minutes of stretching. I have a little gym in my house with a Pilates reformer; when you get to my age – and having danced my whole life – it's something you have to do. It's great being able to stretch but having something else take the weight of your arm or leg.

I recently made the decision to have tea without sugar, and I've started intermittent fasting, too (I never have breakfast anyway).

Morning admin

From about 8.30am to 10am, I go through the show reports from the night before. I'm co-director of *Greatest Days* [which finished on 25 November], co-director/choreographer of *Mamma Mia! The Party*, and associate director of *Elf*. If there was, say, a technical issue with the tour of *Greatest Days*, I'd take it to my resident director Matt Wesley because he's on the ground. My philosophy in everything I do is, don't micromanage people. Hire people who can do their job and then let them explore that. And that then gives you the creative brain space you need to fix things, to look ahead, to get the job done.

Below left Stacey Haynes **Above** Her projects include Mamma Mia! The Party

Changing roles

My preference these days is either to be a director or a resident director. When you're a resident director, you let the director and the associate director get on with it, and whatever they decide, you say, 'OK, I'll maintain that, I'll keep it clean, I'll keep your show as you want it.' Being a director is more pressure and you have to be on top of it, but it can be great fun. Being an associate director means you're there to facilitate the director; you're a sounding board for them, but you generally don't have that much say.

Elf rehearsals

I'll be on the train at 8.30am to get into London for 9am, even through rehearsals don't start until 10am. I cannot bear being late, plus I like getting to the rehearsal venue in time to connect with everyone. We'll have planned what to rehearse the afternoon before (each day at 3.15pm we'll have a tea break for 15 minutes and put a schedule together for the following day). As associate director, I'll be running between different things. I might go to a 10am music call to listen to the vocals, before rehearsing with the kids (we have four boys in the show). I'll also check in with the director [Philip Wm McKinley] to see if he needs my help.

New casts

I worked with *Elf*'s director last year on the same show, but we have a new Buddy, Matt Wolfenden, this year. It's always important to let actors bring themselves to the role. Even if stage directions are set, actors need to feel they have enough flexibility in rehearsals to make the role their own. At the moment, in *Mamma Mia! The Party*, we've got Anthony Costa as Nikos. During the rehearsal process, I gave him freedom to discover new things, even if it meant we had to change a few technical elements. There's nothing worse as a performer to be told, 'Here's the peg, here's the hole you've got to fit into.'

Pot Noodle cravings

I always bring a packed lunch to rehearsals. I'll have mini cheeses, carrot sticks and hummus, or boiled eggs, with Jacobs cream crackers. And lots of water all day. But it's harder in winter. For *Elf*, I'll take in a chicken Pot Noodle as a treat three times a week.

Evening routine

When we finish rehearsing at 6pm I'm on the next train out of London, so that I can be home by 7.15pm. My son will have fed the dogs and walked them, so I'll just cook something quick for us.

For *Mamma Mia! The Party*, though, I look after the show on an ongoing basis, so one or two nights a week, I'll watch it at the O2 and take notes. This means I'll drive to Greenwich in the morning, leave my car there, get the tube to *Elf* rehearsals, and then get back to the O2 for 6.30pm. I'll grab something to eat before the show starts at 7.30pm. It finishes at 10.15pm and I'll drive straight home. I don't do late nights.

Partying at the O2

Sometimes at *Mamma Mia! The Party*, I'll watch the show with Björn [Ulvaeus] if he's over in London. We'll spend the day working together – he likes to refresh the sound every now and again, so we'll have the full company and sound designer in, and then he'll stay on for the evening. He's a lovely man and very easy to work with.

Being at the show offers the best people-watching on the planet. No night is ever the same. You might have a quiet audience, or one who'll be in the 'We're ready to party mode' from the get-go. When you're in a regular theatre auditorium and someone in the audience starts singing, everyone around them will be disturbed. But this show is different. Down on the taverna floor, you can sit at a table or stand at the bar – sometimes the cast can't even get between the tables. If people get too rowdy, the security guards just tell them to keep it down – they usually take it well! M

For Mamma Mia! The Party tickets (booking until 15 June 2025), visit mammamiatheparty.co.uk; for Elf (booking until 6 January 2024), visit elflondon.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: Grant Walker / Piers Allardyce

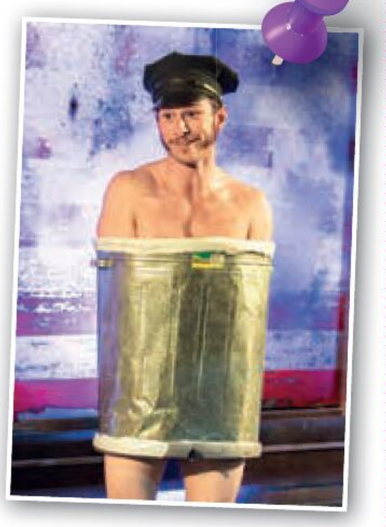
All That Dazzles About Town

London-based reviewer **Daz Gale** picks his personal highlights from an action-packed few weeks of attending Musical Theatre shows, concerts and events

3 OCTOBER 2023

Start spreading the news – the world premiere of a major new biographical jukebox musical took place at **Birmingham Rep** as **Sinatra** paid tribute to a legend. Though full of instantly recognisable songs and boasting a sensational cast led by Matt Doyle (Tony winner for *Company*) in a mesmerising turn as Frank Sinatra, the clunky writing by Joe di Pietro let the show down somewhat, falling short of what such an iconic figure deserves. Still enjoyable and with plenty of potential, however, I highly doubt this is the final curtain for this exciting show.

6 OCTOBER 2023



After five sell-out years at the Edinburgh Fringe, **Police Cops: The Musical** finally arrived at **Southwark Playhouse.** Undeniably the funniest show I have seen in years, the laughs were non-stop with expertly delivered gags accompanied by a fantastic and frenetic '80s-style score penned by Ben Adams. The whole experience was arresting and had me longing to see more from these experts at their craft... So it's lucky this show has just announced another sentence in London next March.

22 OCTOBER 2023

Thousands of theatre lovers flocked to **ExCel London** for the second annual **Musical Con.** Bigger and better than last year's event, the weekend-long celebration was packed full of stalls selling stagey merchandise alongside West End names teaching workshops and taking part in panels. There were also performances from both new and established musicals. This beautifully welcoming and accessible environment bridged the gap between performer and fan to create a wonderful sense of community that assured visitors this really is a place where they belong.

24 OCTOBER 2023

Fresh from wowing audiences in the incredible *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, Maimuna Memon stood front and centre at **Southwark Playhouse** for her self-written show **Manic Street Creature.** Refreshingly subverting the gig musical format to convey a narrative through the form of a concept album being recorded, it tells the story of two musicians falling in love and all the obstacles they face through the course of their relationship as they deal with their mental health. These themes are portrayed with brutal realism and sensitivity to create a consistently captivating musical. With an impressively strong selection of songs, Memon proved there is no shortage to her talents as her own music proved every bit as stunning as her performance.

29 OCTOBER 2023

Four years later than planned, Broadway's Stephanie J Block finally took to the **Cadogan Hall** stage with her new show **'Mother'.** An expert storyteller, she navigated tales from her life and career with charisma and wit. With her inimitable vocals, she treated us to numbers from some of her most famous roles, from shows such as *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Cher Show* and *Wicked*. Indeed her talent exceeded all expectations, with her re-creation of 'I'm Breaking Down' from *Falsettos* blowing the audience away. With an effortless ability to convey emotion through song, Block presented a well-crafted show that was more than worth the wait. I hope we haven't seen the last of her in London.

31 OCTOBER 2023

A cult classic was revived from the darkness on Halloween as **Bat Boy** emerged from his cave to take over the **London Palladium.** Quite a surreal musical, the story felt surprisingly toned down for the most part until the absurdity took over towards the show's climax. You couldn't help but buy into the madness, though, especially with a cast as striking as this. Jordan Luke Gage brilliantly led the show as the half man/half bat creature alongside winning performances from Jodie Steele, Trevor Dion Nicholas and Tosh Wanogho-Maud. However, it was Victoria Hamilton-Barritt who provided the most scene-stealing turn with her brilliantly batty portrayal of Meredith, who seemed to be channelling Patti LuPone. It may be a relatively mad show but it was also magnificent.

5 NOVEMBER 2023

West End favourite and last issue's cover star **Rachel Tucker** took to **Cadogan Hall** for her first concert in six years in celebration of her new album '...You're Already Home'. Showcasing her sensational vocals, she brought Jamie Muscato out for a storming performance of 'Happier Than Ever' and delighted with a tease of her turn in *Sunset Boulevard* with a roof-raising 'As If We Never Said Goodbye'. The highlight of the night for me, however, was an inspired medley of 'Me and the Sky' from *Come From Away* segueing into 'Defying Gravity', paying tribute to her two most famous roles. Proving she truly is at home when onstage, Tucker showed everyone that she just might be the greatest star of all.

Follow All That Dazzles on X, Instagram and Facebook – @ATDazzles – and keep up with all the latest reviews at allthatdazzles.co.uk

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan / Pamela Raith / Daz Gale / Ali Wright / Stephanie Diani / Andy Paradise / Danny Kaan

Backstage with...

David Thaxton, currently starring as shadowy butler Max von Mayerling in Jamie Lloyd's radical reimagining of Sunset Boulevard at the Savoy Theatre

We literally get to go backstage in this production. Do you have any dressing-room rituals?

When John Owen-Jones played The Phantom, he would tweet about his dressing-room playlist and came up with the hashtag #musicoftonight. I always enjoyed that and I revived it when I played the same role. The hashtags have changed depending on the show, and it's currently #MaxTracks. I love it when people suggest music I haven't heard of before.

You won an Olivier for Giorgio in Sondheim's Passion at the Donmar Warehouse, also directed by Jamie Lloyd...

It's amazing getting to work with him 13 years on. We've both grown as people and artists. He's now in his absolute prime and has found his voice and style. I've loved every second of it and the techniques he uses to get into the truth are incredibly creative.

How have your preconceptions of Sunset been challenged by this particular production?

It's one of my favourite shows. I saw it several times in the West End and on Broadway, where I saw Betty Buckley as Norma and George Hearn, one of my Musical Theatre heroes, as Max. I did buy into the staircase, the car, the monkey, but I found it thrilling to do away with all that. Jamie's goal is getting to the truth as economically as possible. It's about four people – Norma, Max, Joe [Tom Francis, pictured below] and Betty – and their desires. The music is some of Lloyd Webber's best and I think the sensibilities of what we're doing have more in common with Billy Wilder's movie than the original production did.

Why do you think audiences are feeling such a strong connection with the material just now?

Now that we have social media and anyone can be famous for 30 seconds, Norma's lust and drive is more pertinent in 2023 than when the show was first performed in 1993. Nicole Scherzinger has had an amazing career but the idea she's playing someone who's lost it all shows it could go at any point – it's exciting, chilling and weird. And then there's the technical side, which is really cutting edge.

You have two leading ladies...

They're both fantastic and completely different. I've known Rachel Tucker for years but Nicole was an unknown quantity to me. She works harder than anyone I know. The whole show is designed around her – Jamie decided after his *Evita* that he wanted to do *Sunset* with her and could already see the production in his mind fully formed.

The projections are so exposing...

I try not to think about it! You're looking down a camera lens so you can't see them. I saw some production photos in which my head is colossal. I asked my wife, 'Do I really look like that?!'

Max is the latest in a line of intense characters you've played...

I've played a lot of authority figures with depression! Even Georg in *She Loves Me*, who has a happy ending, is a depressive. You can't approach it by deciding 'I'm going to be very obsessive'; you have to try to understand how they think and how they react when the wheels come off. You can't really dig far enough with roles like Enjolras, Javert, The Phantom or Max. You get to try out something different every day and keep probing and finding new things and their thoughts, feelings and history.

Do you still have a dream role?

Sweeney Todd. If I'm on my deathbed and I haven't played him, I'll be really pissed off.

What have you learned from working on this production?

To try things, to say yes. There's always a way to get something done if you have an idea, however 'out there' it seems – and that comes from being a blank canvas and being receptive. Not everything works but it often does because you've been open. M

As told to Julia Rank

Sunset Boulevard plays at the Savoy Theatre, London, until 6 January 2024 – for more information and tickets, visit sunsetboulevardwestend.com; for our review, see page 54

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner

BY DEFINITION...

Preview / noun – the term given to a public run of a play or musical ahead of its official opening

A preview offers an exciting sneak peek at a production before critics are invited, and tickets are usually sold at a reduced rate. (It's important to note, however, that in the US, critics can be invited to a preview performance, so long as the show has been 'locked in' – or 'frozen'). A show's preview period can range from several days to weeks or longer (infamous musical *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* holds the record with a solid seven months!). During this time, the performers have their first opportunity to feed off the crowd's energy, adjusting their delivery in response to a live audience's reactions. This testing ground also allows the creative team to identify any kinks and make necessary tweaks. Previews are a crucial part of the production process, helping to mould a show into its finest form before it settles into the final version. They can be a great opportunity to see a show early in its lifecycle and give you 'I saw it first!' bragging rights.

Behind The Song

Andrew Lloyd Webber's 'As If We Never Said Goodbye' from Sunset Boulevard

Musician **Joe Stilgoe** explores the contradictions in diva Norma Desmond's imagined comeback – the show's standout moment, aided by lyricist Don Black in collaboration with Christopher Hampton

Don Black has a notebook filled with rhymes he hasn't used yet. I know this because he shared it with my dad a few years ago when they were curating a concert of the best of his songs, and Don asked Dad if he could use them all in one song. Maxine/vaccine, Pernod/inferno, analyst/panellist... It's a lovely porthole into the mind of the jobbing lyricist. Someone who has to find the right words for the right moment, or the tune might be another forgotten masterpiece (that's a whole other story for another time, of composers having 'suitcase songs' – tunes that never found a home).

I mention this because 'As If We Never Said Goodbye' has some of my favourite Don Black lyrics. If you don't know the song and the show, *Sunset Boulevard* is the story of Norma Desmond, a silent movie star with her career well behind her, reclusive, eccentric and mostly sad, living in a huge house somewhere in the hills of Hollywood.

Based on the 1950 Billy Wilder film, it was a theatrical enterprise years in the making; many had attempted to get the story on to the stage, including a certain Stephen Sondheim (who was apparently warned off the idea by Wilder himself). Lloyd Webber first talked to Don about it in 1979; 14 years later, they revisited it, with the composer also bringing in the playwright Christopher Hampton.

So to the song. Norma is back on set. This isn't work, but what is it? A delusion or a dream?

'I don't know why I'm frightened / I know my way around here.'

She's in her space, her métier, back where once she was adored and revered in equal hysterical measure. 'The cardboard trees, the painted seas, the sound here' – the lyrics quickly fill in the blanks. This is why lyrics are Musical Theatre's secret weapon – they can fulfil exposition in one line that might require a whole scene in dialogue. These lyrics suggest quiet tragedy, which becomes more apparent further into the song as Norma details how much she's missed this world, but it's set against this beautiful tune, which has a stoicism and grandness that elevates the words so we can now believe that she was indeed the star of all stars.

Glenn Close portrays Norma Desmond at the London Coliseum in 2016

The second verse is my favourite – 'whispered conversations in overcrowded hallways'. Now comes one of the great 'Don Black Rhymes™'– 'the atmosphere as thrilling here as always'. First the internal rhyme – atmosphere/here, then the feminine rhyme hallways/always. Doesn't sound earth-shattering, does it? You might well think you can pummel me into the rhyming corner with a Howard Dietz, 'Where a ghost and a prince meet, and everyone ends in mincemeat' or a Larry Hart, 'Sir Paul was frail / he looked a wreck to me / At night, he was a horse's neck to me / So I performed an appendectomy', but those are grandstand rhymes intended for a laugh.

This is more subtle – the lyrics here are for the character, not the audience, or the ego of the writer.

Now back to the music – the whole song is a magnificent build. Lloyd Webber is always brilliant at this as he instinctively writes theatrically and in *Sunset Boulevard* he was given licence to write those huge melodies that sweep the action along and recall the glory days of the Hollywood score. Coming halfway through Act Two, the audience knows Norma well, but the grandness of the music and the oblique lyrics might suggest she really is making a comeback. Is she?

Now she's coming out of make-up, the cameras are ready to go and the key change emphasises this. She declares 'this time will be bigger and brighter than we knew it'. Like all great comebacks, there's a whiff of madness about it – they're rarely driven by public desire but by an unscratched itch. If we didn't know the context it might be a triumphant statement, but in reality it only heightens the tragic loss of this part of her life. It turns out this *was* her life. And that's why this song is the burning core around which the rest of the show spins.

I love songs that are slightly incongruous, that suggest one thing but under closer inspection reveal another. I suppose this show, already a contradiction in itself being a theatre show about cinema, is a great exposition of the artifice of Hollywood. At the time Norma would have been a star, performers were treated with cold disdain by studio bosses if their glow ever showed signs of fading, and for every Chaplin there were hundreds more who were forgotten. As the film *Singin' in the Rain* shows, what if these stars made a horrible noise when they opened their mouths? What if we ever heard them?

We hear her now, and as we approach the climax of the song we're whipped up in the magic of the moment. We can believe it might happen – she might be given one last shot. It's as if she never said goodbye. M

Jamie Lloyd's Savoy production runs until 6 January 2024 – visit sunsetboulevardwestend.com; see our review on page 54

The lyrics here are for the character, not the audience, or the ego of the writer

PHOTOGRAPHY: Richard Hubert Smith; richardhs.com; Instagram – @richard_h_smith)

Broadway Bulletin

It's long been the norm to pay three figures for a ticket to a Broadway shows says **Matt Wolf**, who considers the impact of hefty ticket prices on the collective experience of theatregoing

Glass ceiling? The phrase – once frequently deployed in theatre circles to suggest a barrier beyond which ticket prices couldn't be pushed – has long been a thing of the past. More and more, the headlines surrounding shows are to do with the cost of being able to see them. To hell with art, the mortgages required for attendance are what count.

On and Off Broadway (and in London, too), social media abounds with reports – dismay/surprise/outrage – of the seemingly limitless heights reached by producers who, understandably from their point of view, want a return on investment in ever-trickier times. The received wisdom is that one in every seven or eight Broadway shows recoups, so you can imagine a desire to cash out while you can, since most productions do not.

On the other hand, it sometimes seems as if we've reached a once-imagined realm that no longer seems out of reach. The proffered notion then was of one Broadway show playing eight times a week to an audience of one who had paid a million dollars a ticket. Not much joy to be had there in the convivial art of theatregoing.

I've been around long enough to trace the rise and rise on this front. In 1987, responding to wage increases and spiralling costs, producers of that season's Broadway revival of *Cabaret* – with Joel Grey returning to his Oscar and Tony-winning role as the Emcee – dared to charge $50 for a best seat, and the Broadway bow of *The Phantom of the Opera* quickly followed suit.

Prior to that, the Liza Minnelli star vehicle *The Act* a decade earlier made headlines for charging an unheard-of $25, an indignity compounded by rumours swirling at the time that

Above Cabaret with Eddie Redmayne heads to NYC
Left Ticket prices soared for Broadway's Music Man

Minnelli was lip-synching to one or two of the more physically demanding numbers. There was no social media then, so such assertions, accurate or otherwise, didn't gain the traction they would nowadays. (Also in those days, *The New York Times* theatre ads would often include the ticket prices, something rendered impossible now by the trend toward dynamic pricing where costs can change on a dime, and do.)

Flash forward to 2001 when the Broadway production of *The Producers* took the unusual move of setting aside 50 or so seats per performance to be sold at $480 when the prevailing $100 ticket high confirmed double-digit cost for seats as part of a hallowed bygone era. Late in 2017, the Bette Midler revival of *Hello, Dolly!* took to charging $998 for front row seats that would allow an up-close view of The Divine Miss M in surely her last Broadway appearance. That level of pricing, in turn, had been equalled previously only by *Hamilton* in 2016.

If these numbers represented successive shatterings of a clearly fragile ceiling, average ticket costs have continued to skyrocket. The Hugh Jackman-Sutton Foster revival of *The Music Man*, with tickets topping out at $697, was reported to have an average ticket price of $283. The show was credited for lifting Broadway out of the pandemic to achieve weekly grosses in excess of $3.5 million, but, astonishingly, so vaunted a revival didn't report a recoupment of costs.

A similar price tag is reported for Broadway's April 2024 transfer of Rebecca Frecknall's ongoing revival of *Cabaret*, which, the invaluable *Broadway Journal* reports, will have to sell out for a year at the August Wilson Theatre at an average ticket price of $248 to pay back costs. That's a serious challenge for a show that will only retain its Olivier Award-winning leading man Eddie Redmayne for five months while *The Music Man* kept Jackman and Foster loyally on board for over a year. And more than $9 million of the hefty capitalisation of *Cabaret* is going toward a physical makeover of the theatre in keeping with the overhaul of the Playhouse Theatre in London on the way to it becoming the Kit Kat Club.

Nor is this a uniquely Broadway, or even commercial, phenomenon. Eyebrows have been raised at the triple-digit ticket costs of a good seat for the Off Broadway *Hell's Kitchen*, the show from Alicia Keys that has Broadway in its sights, as previous shows originated at the not-for-profit Public Theater did before it – including *Hamilton* and, going way back, *A Chorus Line*.

Here We Are, the posthumously realised Stephen Sondheim musical [see our review on page 63], prompted Reddit threads astounded at a $349 top ticket for a musical at Hudson Yards's The Shed situated well away from the Broadway mainstream. That's until you remember that its creatives constitute a who's who of Broadway – and, in the case of Tracie Bennett, the West End [see My Musicals on page 82] – and so interest, and demand, are bound to be high.

Indeed, Sondheim of all people would be gobsmacked to note that arguably the three toughest New York tickets as I write are for shows of his: *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Sweeney Todd* on Broadway, and *Here We Are* on its way there. So much for the view of his genius as inimical to mainstream consumption.

Still, I can't help but think that he, of all people, would question a consumerist landscape that has for some while careered from one price-related record high to another. 'Art isn't easy,' we're told in *Sunday in the Park With George*, and neither, these days, is finding an affordable ticket. We're not quite at that realm of the sole occupant waiting for the show to begin but if and when that scenario does ever arrive, it's bound to look awfully lonely at the top. M

"It's reported that Cabaret will have to sell out for a year at an average ticket price of $248 to pay back costs"

PHOTOGRAPHY: Mark Brenner / Julieta Cervantes

Rising Star

Billy Nevers

This young, versatile performer is living his best life as Lafayette/Jefferson in the new tour of Hamilton

Who Still only 22, Billy Nevers has been working professionally since 2019 when he was plucked out of ArtsEd to appear in the ensemble of Timothy Sheader's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (*JCS*) at the Barbican. He then went straight into *& Juliet,* first in Manchester and afterwards in London, appearing as a swing, then as first cover François, then as François ('I rinsed out every opportunity there was with that show!' he jokes). When *& Juliet* closed briefly during the pandemic, Nevers returned to Sheader's *JCS*, this time at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre where the production first originated. In 2022, he returned to the venue as ensemble/cover Emmett in Lucy Moss*'s Legally Blonde*, a production he remains 'very proud' to have been a part of. There followed a stint as Fred in *Groundhog Day* at the Old Vic this summer where Nevers got to pursue his passion for 'character acting, comedy, dancing, and working with wonderful people'. Which brings us to *Hamilton* – for Nevers, 'the ultimate dream to come true'.

Theatrical beginnings

Growing up in Surrey, with a mother who trained as an actress and who currently teaches drama at a college where she's also head of performing arts, Nevers took local dance classes and then joined Songtime Theatre Arts (now British Theatre Academy, or BTA) from the age of seven. At school, he struggled academically and happily moved to Italia Conti to take his GCSEs. He won a Musical Theatre scholarship to ArtsEd for sixth form, and was due to

continue there on the three-year degree course, but ultimately that wasn't to be...

Auditions Nevers knew his heart wasn't in doing a degree so, while still in Year 13, he auditioned for 'every show under the sun' and did so well ('I was in the finals for Simba in *The Lion King*') that he decided to brave it in the professional world. He landed *JCS*, and then, through his friend Grace Mouat – who he'd met at National Youth Music Theatre – he met the casting director of *& Juliet*. The show was a real learning curve. 'I was a deer in the headlights,' he recalls. 'To cover all six male ensemble tracks was daunting but so exciting. It was great for me to test my skills as a dancer, singer and ensemble member.' By the time the show closed, he was playing François and 'couldn't have asked for anything more'.

Passion vs ego 'In this industry, we put pressure on ourselves to show the world we're blessed to be working,' Nevers says. *Groundhog Day* was a crucial reminder for him to 'lead with your passion, not your ego. People would say: "But your role's not as big as François," but François doesn't sing in a part of the voice I like to sing in, and he doesn't dance. *Groundhog Day* let me to fulfil these passions, and the Old Vic was a venue I'd always aspired to work in.'

Hamilton (finally!) When the show first came out, the young Nevers was obsessed: 'I'd sing it in the bathroom and on my way to school.' It was, he says, 'the first show I'd seen where I could see a version of myself onstage'. When he first auditioned in Year 13, he made it all the way to the final. Every year since, he has auditioned, without success, for different tracks – but this year was different: 'They only sent me the Lafayette/Jefferson material. And in the past, I've done so many rounds but this time it was only two or three.' During rehearsals, Nevers says he was 'holding back tears' on a daily basis. 'I used to say that if I could do *Hamilton*, I'd call it quits,' he confides.

Mentoring Teaching is important to Nevers because, at school, he lacked role models: 'I didn't have teachers that looked like me, or spoke like me, or danced like me, or saw the world like me.' He has seen the influence his mum has on young people in 'changing perceptions of themselves', and since *Legally Blonde* has seen positive changes within the industry, but he believes there's still a long way to go. Nevers doesn't take for granted the changes he can affect as a teacher and performer when it comes to the younger generation. As he puts it: 'I want to show them that they're so much more than the boxes we're put into.'

Hamilton opened at Manchester Palace Theatre on 11 November and is playing there until 1 March 2024; it's then on tour until 25 January 2025 – visit hamiltonmusical.com/uk-tour

PHOTOGRAPHY: Hamilton UK and Ireland tour/ Michael Wharley

Cable Street marches into Southwark Playhouse!

A revolutionary new musical is visiting Southwark Playhouse Borough in February 2024. Set in 1936 in the heart of London's Jewish community, Cable Street is the true story of a cross-section of East Londoners who rose up to protect their neighbourhood from Oswald Mosley's fascist Blackshirts.

The show is written by playwright Alex Kanefsky and composer/lyricist Tim Gilvin (the latter also penned the music for *Unfortunate*, playing at Southwark Playhouse over Christmas), and stars Debbie Chazen and Sophia Ragavelas. It's directed by Adam Lenson, founder of SIGNAL, which has showcased the work of multiple emerging writers.

Researching the story, Kanefsky became increasingly aware of the parallels with today: 'A financial depression, political upheaval, and powerful figures scapegoating minorities... The battle of 1936 feels deeply resonant in [these] dark times.'
For more information, visit southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

Touring the UK in 2024...

An Officer and a Gentleman with Luke Baker and Georgia Lennon sets sail on 23 February and **Come from Away** (pictured) launches on 1 March, with Sara Poyzer and Natasha J Barnes. **Little Shop of Horrors** starts at Ipswich's New Wolsey Theatre (1 March), and **Grease** jives across the UK/Ireland from 12 April.

Meanwhile, Douglas Hodge and Johnny McKnight's **101 Dalmatians** tours from 22 June, and **A Chorus Line** returns to Leicester Curve from 28 June prior to Sadler's Wells and beyond. Fresh from the West End, **& Juliet** embarks on its first UK tour from 8 July, and Brenda Edwards, a previous 'Motormouth' Maybelle in **Hairspray**, co-directs a new production of the show from 16 July.

And finally, a new production of **Dear Evan Hansen** tours from 9 September and **Only Fools and Horses** swaps Peckham for Bromley and elsewhere from 23 September. Look out for reviews in future issues!

New UK writing on the up

The annual Stiles + Drewe Best New Song Prize, which was founded by composer George Stiles and lyricist Anthony Drewe in 2008, returned to The Other Palace on 13 November for its 16th instalment, hosted by Rob Madge. The event, once again produced by Mercury Musical Developments (MMD), saw the £1,000 prize go to Rachel Walker Mason and Nina Sundstrom for 'Drown Without Water' from *The Circle*.

The Other Palace and The Turbine Theatre, meanwhile, have announced the return of MTFestUK in January 2024, during which eight shortlisted productions will be presented.
Visit mercurymusicals.com; theturbinetheatre.com

Keeping Score Annie Get Your Gun

We can't think of this show without humming Irving Berlin's score, yet he was a late addition to the project says **Jason Carr**, who explores the composer's enduring foray into the narrative musical

'The average United States citizen is perfectly epitomised in Irving Berlin's music... Both the typical Yankee and the Berlin tune have humour, originality, pace and popularity; both are sometimes a little loud, but what might unsympathetically be mistaken for brass, is really gold. In short, what I really want to say, is that Irving Berlin has no place in American music. He *is* American music.'

These comments, by *Show Boat* composer Jerome Kern, are even more astonishing when we realise they were written in 1924 when Berlin was only 36 – 18 years before the world's biggest-selling single 'White Christmas', and over 20 years before he would write his stage masterpiece *Annie Get Your Gun*.

When five-year-old Russian-Jewish Izzy Baline arrived in New York in 1893, he spoke only Yiddish, yet would develop a playful and idiomatic English that would become the envy of any lyricist. Despite never learning to read music and only playing the piano (badly, by ear) in the key of F sharp, his music demonstrates a sophisticated sense of harmony and structure, as well as his celebrated melodic gift.

Berlin would produce over 1,500 songs in his long career, while chief among his stage musicals is *Annie Get Your Gun*. Irreplaceable as his superlative score now seems, it is amazing to learn he was a late addition to the project. Herbert Fields, who co-wrote the book with his sister Dorothy, had recently penned three hit shows with Cole Porter for Broadway star Ethel Merman. It was Fields's brainwave to star 'the Merm' as sharp-shooting Annie Oakley and he persuaded Rodgers and Hammerstein to join the project as producers. The music was to be by Jerome Kern.

Tragically, Kern took the train from California to discuss the show, and shockingly suffered a fatal collapse on the streets of New York. Nonetheless, Rodgers and Hammerstein remained committed to the show and approached Berlin to write the score. Berlin professed to being nervous both about 'writing hillbilly' and tailoring songs for what he called 'a situation show' (meaning a narrative musical in the manner *de rigueur* since Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* of 1943). However, Rodgers and Hammerstein reassured him that 'situations' were in fact a great stimulus to finding ideas for songs, and that 'substituting a few cain't's for cant's' would be all that was required for the requisite hickory-smoke flavour.

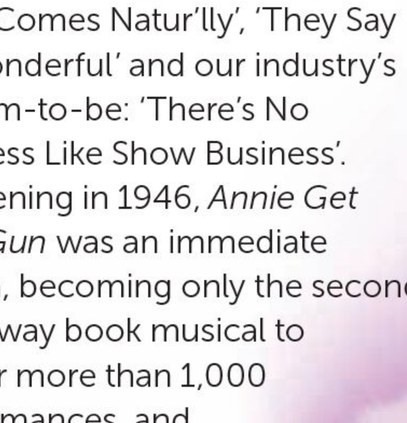
Above Rachel Tucker, 2003 concert **Below** Jane Horrocks, 2009, Young Vic

Berlin took a week to think about it, re-emerging with sketches of half-a-dozen miraculous songs, including 'Doin' What Comes Natur'lly', 'They Say it's Wonderful' and our industry's anthem-to-be: 'There's No Business Like Show Business'.

Opening in 1946, *Annie Get Your Gun* was an immediate smash, becoming only the second Broadway book musical to run for more than 1,000 performances, and provided Merman with one of her signature roles. The songs are almost relentlessly top-drawer – note the perfectly-placed double and triple rhymes of 'You Can't Get a Man With a Gun', or the heart-breaking falling harmonies that underpin the simple rising melody of 'I Got Lost in His Arms'.

There are problems in reviving the show: it's hard now to stomach the sight of a talented woman deliberately losing a shooting contest so as not to humble the preening man she loves; and the portrayal of Native American people is, well, of its time – the song 'I'm an Indian, Too' is now unperformable. Nevertheless, the show continues to be frequently revived on every scale. The last Broadway revival in 1999 starred Bernadette Peters and later Reba McEntire. Richard Jones's 2009 London revival, starring Jane Horrocks and Julian Ovenden, was widely acclaimed for its fresh vision (and featured my own four-piano orchestration, sounding like a western saloon on acid...). M

Jason Carr's listening recommendation



Annie Get Your Gun
1966 Lincoln Center cast
Ethel Merman, Bruce Yarnell, Jerry Orbach
Orchestra / Franz Allers
RCA Victor Broadway

There are cast albums or studio recordings featuring almost every female star: Mary Martin, Doris Day, Dolores Gray, Betty Hutton (in MGM's movie), Judy Garland (sacked from aforementioned movie, but recorded) all have claims on your ears. Modern studio recordings with Judy Kaye or Kim Criswell are also terrific. Merman's 1946 recording is rather limited by the technology of the time but happily, by the time the show was revived for her in 1966, recording had come a long way. Her signature vocal mannerisms have become more pronounced but, contrary to her popular image as a vocal bulldozer, her 'I Got Lost in His Arms' makes me cry every time.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Kaan / Tristram Kenton

New Musicals Spotlight

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

Theatre songwriter **Tim Connor** on a haunting musical by Eamonn O'Dwyer and Helen Watts

The auditorium lights dim to the sound of evening church bells, chiming the hour. Nine in all. Slow, steady, endless.

A mournful oboe breaks the silence after the last gong. Then a sparse, unsettled 12/8 motif starts up on the harp, as a lone girl's voice rings out. The music continues to build, *poco a poco*.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a crunchy, dissonant chorus of voices erupt. Pounding percussion accompanies them – and a nerve-shredding horn, like a horse neighing in distress. You have arrived in Sleepy Hollow – as told through the thrilling sound world of composer and lyricist Eamonn O'Dwyer.

Washington Irving's 1819 short story novella is probably best known as the jumping-off point for the late-'90s Johnny Depp film. But while the title became familiar worldwide, few have read the original story.

It concerns a secluded and superstitious American town that receives a new school teacher. Hailing from New York, he starts to challenge the townsfolk's superstitions and beliefs. As events unfold, the community is forced to face up to its terrifying destiny.

The musical version came about when Jeremy Walker, the artistic director of National Youth Music Theatre (NYMT), got in touch with O'Dwyer with the suggestion of writing something for the company.

Above/below NYMT's 2018 London staging of The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

After looking through a list of stories in the public domain, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* piqued O'Dwyer's interest.

'I've always loved darker things: ghosts, witches and all that stuff', he explains. 'I felt there was enough richness in Irving's text to spin out a whole world. So I called up my collaborator, book writer Helen Watts, and she said to me: "If we can find a way of getting at least three strong female characters into it, then I'm in!"'

So they set to work creating a whole community out of the source material, which features only four named characters and is about 50 pages long. In contrast, NYMT would need a full-length show for a cast of 30 young performers.

Watts and O'Dwyer wanted to avoid having a handful of principals and then an ensemble. They felt strongly that every character should be fully fleshed out and have some agency within the narrative.

Writing for NYMT also meant getting to craft orchestrations especially for the premiere production, in collaboration with Charlie Ingles. 'When do you ever get to write for a line-up that includes flute, oboe, bassoon, clarinet, bass clarinet, cor anglais, harp and horn?!' says O'Dwyer.

And the Old World Americana setting provided further inspiration with opportunities for Copland-esque nods. Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* was another reference point, particularly in the oboe writing.

'I've heightened the creepy by going for a cinematic scale, throwing in a whole load of notes that shouldn't really be there. But if you were to take away the harmonic palette, a lot of the songs are actually quite simple and modal – like something you'd hear sung around the fire.

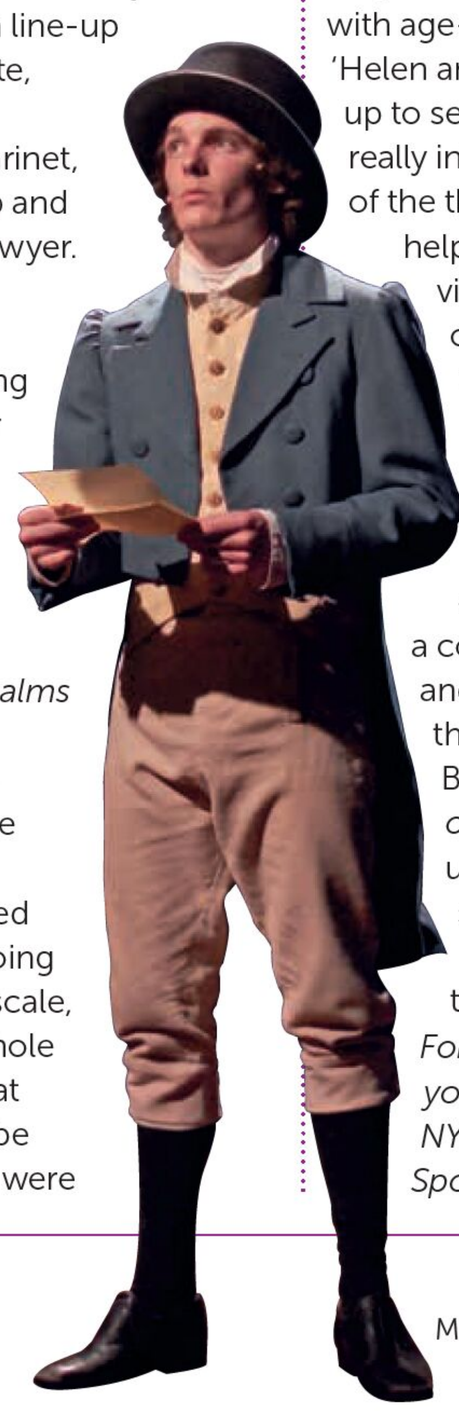
'But it felt right to twist everything around, particularly for a story about a town that is cursed. That's why everything's a bit wonky and a bit diminished. Things don't resolve because they can't,' explains O'Dwyer.

The NYMT's sell-out production was staged at The Other Palace in 2018. A crowd-funded cast album was later released and the show became available for global licensing by Concord. It has proved enormously popular, with seven youth or student UK productions since that original London run.

Earlier this year, an amateur theatre group in Blackpool staged it, marking its first outing with age-appropriate actors. 'Helen and I couldn't make it up to see it, sadly. But we were really intrigued. Because one of the things that can really help give a sense of a whole village is seeing a range of ages and types up onstage.'

Which also makes it an ideal vehicle as a co-production between older community actors, a core of professionals and a team of youth theatre youngsters. Because *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* is, unashamedly, a huge show – that rarest and most glorious of things in new writing. M

For a taste of the show, you can listen to the NYMT cast album on Spotify – sptfy.com/P4sn



The Legend of Sleepy Hollow is, unashamedly, a huge show – that most glorious of things in new writing

PHOTOGRAPHY: Rob Youngson

Hannah Waddingham's 'Home for Christmas'

The glittering career of Musical Theatre leading lady and *Ted Lasso* Emmy-winning screen star Hannah Waddingham continues to flourish apace. This year alone, she was the magnificent host (and performer) at the Olivier Awards and the (bilingual!) co-presenter of the Eurovision Song Contest. She also delighted TV audiences as the seductive Lady Bellaston in costume drama *Tom Jones*.

To top off a rip-roaring 2023, she's now starring in a Christmas special available to view on Apple TV+. The musical extravaganza features guest appearances from her *Ted Lasso* co-stars as well as artists such as Sam Ryder, Luke Evans and the London Gay Men's Chorus. *Musicals* magazine's Editor Sarah Kirkup was there for the filming at the London Coliseum and hugely enjoyed the experience: 'Waddingham is the real deal,' she says. 'Her vocal range is impressive, she is warm and engaging with her audience and fellow performers, and, despite her star status, she remains humble about her beginnings as the daughter of a mother who sang for years with the ENO Chorus.'

'Hannah Waddingham: Home for Christmas' premiered globally on 22 November on Apple TV+

CABARET: WEST END EXTENSION, BROADWAY – AND SELFRIDGES!

The party keeps on going at the Kit Kat Club. Rebecca Frecknall's multi-award-winning London production has been extended yet again until 28 September 2024. Jake Shears and Rebecca Lucy Taylor aka Self Esteem continue as The Emcee and Sally Bowles until 27 January, alongside Nathan Ives-Moiba (Cliff), Beverley Klein (Fraulein Schneider) and Teddy Kempner (Herr Schultz).

A breeding ground for talent, the show has served as a showcase for, among others, 'super swing' Emily Benjamin who, as we reported in the last issue, is starring in *Bronco Billy – The Musical* at Charing Cross Theatre from 23 January – look out for Matt Wolf's interview with the actress/singer in our next issue.

Now setting its sights further afield, *Cabaret* will be hitting Broadway's August Wilson Theatre from 1 April next year, where Eddie Redmayne will reprise his Olivier Award-winning performance as The Emcee for a limited run (though prices will be high – see page 18); US-based Scottish actress Gayle Rankin (*GLOW*, *House of the Dragon*) plays Sally Bowles.

Other cast members include Bebe Neuwirth, who won a Tony for her portrayal of Velma Kelly in the long-running revival of *Chicago*, as Fraulein Schneider. Steven Skybell (*Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Lehmann Trilogy*) plays Herr Schultz and Ato Blankson-Wood (Tony nominated for *Slave Play*) is Cliff.

But the show isn't only confined to the theatre. Back in London, Christmas shoppers can visit Selfridges for exclusive performances from the show's Prologue company. Never has 'shop 'til you drop' been more apt...

Visit kitkat.club; selfridges.com

London: the place to be in 2024

'Put on your Sunday clothes' for an array of glamorous London openings, both in the West End and a little further afield – all set to usher in the new year in style!

The *Musicals* team is particularly excited about Imelda Staunton taking the title role in a strictly limited run of evergreen classic Hello, Dolly! at the London Palladium from 6 July to 14 September (reuniting Staunton with Follies director Dominic Cooke). The award-winning actress will be joined by Tyrone Huntley, Andy Nyman, Jenna Russell and Harry Hepple. We're also impatient for Opening Night, songwriter Rufus Wainwright's first foray into musicals, at the Gielgud Theatre from 6 March to 27 July. Based on the 1977 film, the show, directed by Ivo van Hove, follows a leading lady (Sheridan Smith, pictured below with Wainwright and van Hove) whose new play on Broadway is rocked by personal turmoil.

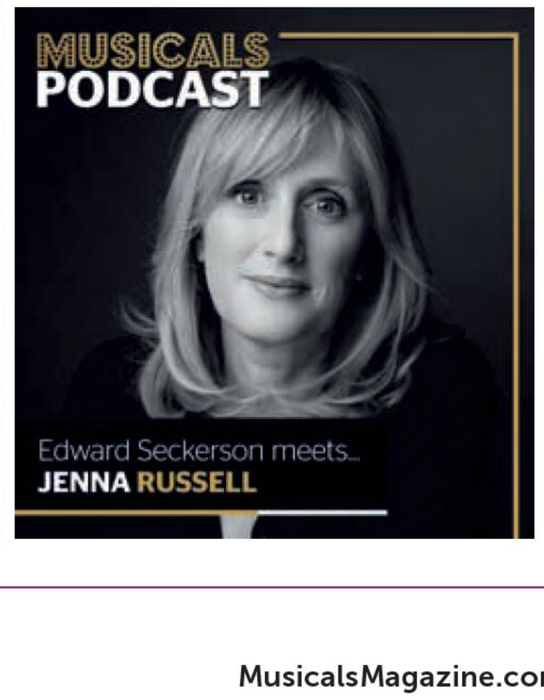
Also in the West End, Mean Girls will be making fetch happen at the Savoy Theatre from 5 June, and The Devil Wears Prada will be at the Dominion Theatre from 24 October. Out in Wembley, meanwhile, Starlight Express takes to the tracks at the Troubadour from 8 June in its first London revival. Get your skates on!

Jenna Russell joins our Podcast

We continue our podcast series 'Edward Seckerson Meets...' with the wonderful Jenna Russell, who has just finished performing the title role in the heart-warming *Flowers for Mrs Harris* at Riverside Studios (see our review on page 47). In this exclusive interview for *Musicals*, Russell talks about the joy of playing Mrs Harris, her admiration for composers Adam Guettel and Jason Robert Brown, and her determination to tell a story through song.

You can listen to all our podcasts so far (with guests including Jamie Muscato and Jamie Parker) via our website, where you'll also find some exclusive online content, including a review of *Branwen: Dadeni*, a new Welsh-language musical which recently premiered at the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff, and an interview with singer-songwriter Maimuna Memon, whose self-penned *Manic Street Creature* just finished at Southwark Playhouse. We also report on *West End Woofs*, the charity event hosted by Bernadette Peters and Elaine Paige where in-need doggies were paired with their forever owners.

To explore this content and more (including how to take out a subscription to Musicals this Christmas), visit musicalsmagazine.com



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KNIGHT *in* SHINING ARMOUR

'Queen of Soul' Beverley Knight has been starring in musicals for a decade and, since recently turning 50, has won an Olivier Award, toured the UK and released her first album in seven years. As she prepares to return to Sister Act, the performer talks to **Matt Wolf** about the theatre industry's welcome and how she is determined to 'own her own power' while pursuing such a varied career

PHOTOGRAPHY: Julian Broad

> **You get to your fifties and you're like, 'I am the all-conquering hero'. This is honest to God how I feel**

Turning 50 might prompt a reckoning for many a performer who could well find themselves facing diminished opportunities amidst an industry forever privileging youth. But try telling that to Beverley Knight. The beloved soul singer-turned-Musical Theatre stalwart passed this milestone in March, since which time she has won an Olivier Award, released a new album, completed a tour, and set her sights on an increasingly wide-ranging creative future – middle age clearly a marker in her case of more exciting work still to come.

'There's something liberating about turning 50,' a notably cheerful Knight was telling me during a late-morning Zoom call, her enthusiasm clear from her initial greeting: 'How are you this fine morning?'

By her own estimation 'a glass half-full' person, she has embraced growing older as belonging to a comparable growth in her own career. ' At this age, people really expect women to reduce themselves and disappear,' she says, pointing to Angela Bassett and Renée Zellweger as just two examples of women of a certain age who won't be reined in. 'I look at these women, and others, who tell me there's no limit to greatness, to sexiness, to owning your own power.'

Warming to her theme, she continues: 'I want other women to know and to feel that they can just go out there and be who they are. You get to your fifties and you're like, "I am the all-conquering hero": this is honest to God how I feel, and no one can tell me anything different.'

This sense of affirmation – of Knight's ongoing decision to seize the day – is everywhere evident on her new album, packed with original material and tellingly titled 'The Fifth Chapter' (a reference right there to turning 50). The song titles make clear her state of mind. 'I'm On Fire', 'Everything's Gonna Be Alright' and 'Queen of Everything' share a deep-rooted sense of occasion and joy as befits someone who was amazed years back to find herself listed on a national newspaper's list of the '10 happiest people in Britain'. Knight smiles at me down the computer, 'I am that person.'

Why aren't show tunes included in the new album mix? This is, after all, someone whose entry into the top echelons of the British Musical Theatre led to an Olivier last April for the Old Vic production of *Sylvia*. 'I wanted to go back to what I'm originally known for doing, and the best way I knew how was with new and fresh and celebratory songs. There will be a time where I will do an album expressing my love for Musical Theatre' – of revealing, say, her inner Audra McDonald – 'but for now I wanted to go back to being Bev the musician.'

That's what she was, of course, around the time she turned 40, since when Knight has sidled ever more prominently towards musicals, the art form that she is the first to say has revolutionised her life and work. (She married her husband, James O'Keefe, just before that previous landmark birthday.) Her first West End gig was as Tony winner Heather Headley's replacement at the Adelphi in the stage musical adaptation of *The Bodyguard*, with Knight now a regular returnee to stages up and down the country in the years since.

Above Beverley Knight will reprise the role of Deloris in Sister Act in spring 2024 **Below** A second Olivier nod came for the West End staging of The Drifters Girl

To start with, she admits, musicals seemed out of reach. 'I was conscious of my music having been my entire life and didn't know how one would make the jump.' As a result, no one was as surprised as she to find herself scrolling a pre-X Twitter only to find news of a looming change of leading lady for *The Bodyguard*. 'I was just a fan learning about a cast change and then it was like, "Oh my God, I'm going to go for it," and the rest is history: it was like fate said, "Here's your answer, Bev."'

That random observation on Twitter resulted with time in Knight's London takeover as Rachel Marron and with it the opportunity to sing nightly the Whitney Houston songbook. Her next West End role offered a chance to originate this side of the Atlantic the part of the fast-rising singer Felicia Farrell in the Tony-winning musical *Memphis* that had brought its Broadway originator, Montego Glover, a Tony Award nomination.

The Drifters Girl followed (along with a second Olivier nod, the first being for *Memphis*) as did *Sister Act*, and it is that latter title which Knight is reprising next spring for a limited run (15 March to 8 June) at London's Dominion Theatre. Why go back to this particular well? 'Quite frankly there was this window for me to be able to do it, and I thought, "Yeah, I can make this work". It was only a short run the first time and I had such a laugh, so I was like, "OK, let's do it again".'

With each stage role, Knight is keen to find a connection, all the while furthering skills as an actress that she nurtured as a child but had then put to one side to make music. Knight has herself experienced several instances of stalking over time – one from someone online – so knew the terrain of *The Bodyguard*: 'I understood how it felt to be quite nervous about someone and to know that there was a threat; I brought [to the show] that feeling of being unnerved, even if I haven't specifically lived in [Rachel Marron's] shoes.'

With *Sister Act*, adapted from the 1992 film about a lounge singer who finds herself raising the roof within a convent, she could draw upon her Pentecostal background in Wolverhampton as the middle child (and, by her own admission, the most extrovert) of Jamaican parents; at college in Gloucestershire, she studied theology and philosophy, so that was useful, too.

'I've always led a choir, so that sort of thing [within the show] was entirely natural and normal. The bits I had to get under my feet were Deloris [Van Cartier, her character] as a streetwise, savvy woman in the sort of nightclub that definitely wasn't my experience.' What isn't difficult for Knight is inheriting parts from some impressive forbears, whether they be *The Bodyguard*'s Headley or Tony winner (for *Pippin*) Patina Miller, who earned Olivier and Tony nominations when she originated *Sister Act* on the London and Broadway stage.

'I saw Patina in *Sister Act* and she absolutely smashed it, and all these women – Montego [Glover] too – are wonderful. But I see them in these roles not as a challenge but more in terms of setting a benchmark for me to apply what I do, so that the standard never ever drops. I see things with my own perspective, and I guess I'm just able to do that.'

PHOTOGRAPHY: Julian Broad / Oliver Rosser / Jeff Spicer

Above/right Celebrating an Olivier Award-winning performance as Emmeline Pankhurst in Sylvia **Below** Knight's album 'The Fifth Chapter' is fresh and upbeat

The great thing for me, even before the Olivier Award, was that playing Emmeline was already a game-changer

Sylvia was something different – a fiery, dance-intensive view of the suffragette movement from the director-choreographer Kate Prince, with a book co-written with Priya Parmar and music by Josh Cohen and DJ Walde, that embraced non-traditional casting, as the likes of *Hamilton* had done before it. Knight was part of the project from its inception, across two different Old Vic engagements on the way to coming away third time lucky from the Olivier Awards in April. No one who saw her speech will forget her kick-ass gloves. Or, as Knight puts it, laughing: 'If you're going to wear the latex, Bev, then you've got to finish the look.'

Surely, Knight could never have expected she might play Sylvia's mother, the visionary political activist Emmeline Pankhurst, who, amongst other things, was white – a casting coup which sits alongside the Olivier as another reason why this particular stage experience was so sweet. 'The great thing for me, even before the Olivier, was that playing Emmeline was already a game-changer; that kind of shift [Black actors playing real-life white figures] was already happening in the theatre in general, and if it was to others' consternation, my feeling was, "That's someone else's problem, not mine".'

And what of emerging triumphant at the ceremony itself? 'It felt like official validation for what I've been doing and as if the work itself had paid off. It wasn't as if they were saying, "We like Bev because she's dead nice and sings really well" but more, "We like Bev because she can absolutely do this: she delivers in what she's trying to achieve when she steps onstage." In short, they were saying to me, "Bev's an actress", and that meant everything. I can actually feel myself getting a bit choked about it even now.'

The knock-on effect, Knight is the first to acknowledge, has been an uptick an offers and the chance to pitch ideas to people keen to collaborate: 'Hollywood is knocking, and that's kind of blown me away.' As regards theatre, she jumps in when I mention the forthcoming Broadway revival of *The Wiz*. 'Am I too old to play Dorothy?' she asks, only half-joking. 'Theatre is all about suspending reality and entering into the space.'

At the same time, her return to touring this autumn has constituted its own sort of pleasure. 'We artists on the road have it easier compared to Musical Theatre performers doing a tour – I don't care what anybody says, that routine is the hardest work you can do.'

She knows the difference between performing solo and being part of a show. 'When I'm onstage, singing as me, there's a lot more freedom frankly to really let go and do what I want, and if I decide to hold out the mic to the audience, I can do that.' Even better, she has the band there to cover 'if I'm going to have a coughing fit' (a possibility with Knight that seems unlikely). Inhabiting a role, by contrast, is all about self-care. 'Give the kids what they

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan / Julian Broad / Joanne Davidson

want – the big vocals – but from the outset design it so that you can deliver those big notes across all the shows in a given week and so that you also give yourself headroom to recover: there's a lot more to what I'm doing [in a theatre performance] than perhaps people realise.'

Knight speaks fulsomely about being accepted into a potentially sceptical Musical Theatre world. It's significant, for instance, that she was the one chosen by Andrew Lloyd Webber to give a mid-pandemic concert in the summer of 2020 as a pilot to test whether theatres were safe enough to reopen, albeit with a reduced audience. (Among her West End credits to date is – you guessed it – a revival of *Cats*.)

In 2017, Knight teamed up with Cassidy Janson (*Beautiful*) and Amber Riley (*Dreamgirls*) – themselves Olivier trophy-bearers – to form Leading Ladies, a West End trio whose first single, 'One Night Only', came, in fact, from *Dreamgirls*. With the alliance now in abeyance following *Glee* star Riley's return to the US, Knight looks back fondly on singing with two women 'who have such great talent and have had much longer careers than myself and who knew that we could get together and have a ball. Hopefully there will be a chance to repeat that experience.' Maybe – she laughs – 'for one night only.'

It was after Leading Ladies disbanded that Janson won her 2020 Olivier for *& Juliet*, and Knight is quick to give shout-outs to her theatre compatriots. 'I was waiting for Cassidy to win that Olivier, I called it,' she exults, just as she did from the Royal Albert Hall stage last spring when she paid admiring tribute to her fellow nominee, Marisha Wallace (*Oklahoma!*)

'Marisha has got to be next in line for an Olivier,' insists Knight, 'and when she does win, I want to be the one handing it out to her: she's wonderful, talented, gorgeous, hard-working – all of it.' Her roll call of deserving recipients by no means ends there: she cites Carly Mercedes Dyer (Faye Treadwell in *The Drifters Girl* tour) and *Sylvia* co-star Sharon Rose as Olivier winners-in-waiting, and gives equal time to the men, singling out by name Jason Pennycooke (*Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends*) and Tosh Wanogho-Maud (late of both *The Drifters Girl* and *Ain't Too Proud*).

What matters most, you feel, is that she can include herself in such company. 'They welcomed me in, and I will forever be grateful for that. I mean, I understood at the very beginning that there would have been hesitation. So many people have come into musicals as a stopgap just as a way to make money while the next bus arrives, or that kind of thing. For me,' she says by way of contrast, 'if you're going to do something, do the bloody thing right – with integrity and honour and be mindful of those who have done it before you. Pay respect to everybody in the building: they are all doing a job and are there to make sure the production will be great and that all of us shine. That spirit is what I embrace and I guess because of that, the Musical Theatre family has embraced me right back – but first, I had to make sure I was delivering the work.'

If there's a downside to the career-juggling, it's lack of time. Knight is disappointed not to have yet seen *Guys & Dolls*, though she certainly will, naming not just Wallace but her pal 'Cedders' (aka Cedric Neal, who plays Nicely Nicely Johnson) as a defining reason to go. And at the time of our conversation, she regrets not being able to be at the gala opening of her chum Pennycooke in the Sondheim revue because she is travelling up to Manchester that same night to promote her album on BBC Breakfast.

What gets reaffirmed across our hour-long chat is a can-do view of the world that still makes room for heartache: 'When my best friend Tyrone [Jamison] died [of an Aids-related illness in 2003], I wrote "No One Loves in Vain" and "Remember Me". But positivity is her preferred place. 'I don't know where it comes from but it's been there since I was tiny. I came out of the womb saying, "Here I am, give me the mic."'

On that front, she has a good laugh when I report a fan's comment beneath a recent single of hers online that Knight may well be Britain's best bet at winning Eurovision.

'I love Eurovision but I don't even know that Ed blinkin' Sheeran could go there and win because it's become less about greatness and more about what country has fallen out with whatever.' Her response comes with a delicious aside about having 'a bit of a gay man deep down inside me', coupled with an avowed distaste for Brexit. 'That was not my vote, I didn't vote that way,' she says, before concluding: 'Europe isn't loving us right now. I'm not sure if I went out there and sang that it would make much difference.'

Besides, there's far too much going on at home. 'I feel as if so many great things are happening for great people,' she adds, too modest to include herself directly within those very ranks. At the same time, we fully believe the summary take she expresses on her life right now. 'I'm here for it, I really am.' M

Beverley Knight's album 'The Fifth Chapter' on Tag8/BMG is available now – see our review on page 68 (and see our review of her London Palladium concert on page 58); for tickets to Sister Act at the Dominion Theatre (15 Mar – 8 Jun 2024), visit sisteractthemusical.co.uk; and for the latest news on Beverley Knight, visit beverleyknight.com

Discovering Dahl's winning formula

In his stories, Roald Dahl's young protagonists must use bravery and imagination to outsmart insufferable adults. As a new production of **The Witches** comes to the National Theatre, these same qualities could be said to be essential for any theatrical creative team attempting to capture the author's singularly unique and anarchic spirit, finds **Claire Allfree**

Could there be a more frightening moment in children's literature than the one in Roald Dahl's 1983 novel *The Witches* in which it is suggested to the reader that any woman in the world could potentially be a witch in disguise? And not just any old witch, but the sort of witch who hates children so much she turns them into mice? 'She might even be your lovely school teacher who is reading these words to you at this very moment,' says our narrator, a seven-year-old boy. 'Look carefully at that teacher… I am not, of course, telling you for one second that your teacher actually is a witch. All I am saying is that she might be one.' 'That bit is so scary!' squeal the actresses Maggie Service and Bobbie Little. 'Dahl is so good at creating those everyday moments when we are unaware danger might be upon us.'

I've met Service and Little, and fellow actress Zoe Birkett – all three of whom play a witch in the National Theatre's winter family musical adaptation of Dahl's children's horror classic – during a break in rehearsals a month before the show opens for previews. We are secreted away in the press room, far away from the rehearsal space, but I'm assured that almost every room throughout the building is home to frenetic activity: dedicated specialist teams are hard at work, creating wigs, gloves (the witches have to wear two pairs – green gloves to convey that their bodies are, in this production, covered in slime rather than skin, and a second pair on top to disguise this fact), magical illusions, and an awful lot of robot mice.

'The mice all have tiny remote control cameras on their heads,' says Birkett – a seasoned West End Musical Theatre performer – in delight. 'It's so that we witches avoid stepping on them. There is a team of people backstage whose job it is during the show to control them. It's next-level technology. The current production of *Sunset Boulevard* [currently playing at the Savoy] uses handheld cameras, but I've never seen anything like this.'

> **In terms of scale, reach and representation, Dahl and the National Theatre are a great match**
>
> Jenny Worton, Roald Dahl Story Company

Above/below/overleaf The 54-strong cast, including 30 children, in rehearsal for The Witches **Below left** Katherine Kingsley is playing the Grand High Witch

If everything goes to plan, nor will the audiences at the National Theatre. *The Witches*, adapted by Lucy Kirkwood, directed by Lyndsey Turner and with a score and lyrics by the American composer Dave Malloy, is one of the biggest shows the National has ever mounted. It's been in development for nine years. The 54-strong cast includes a revolving set of 30 children. It uses more props than any show in the theatre's history. It has illusions aplenty – and let's not forget those robot mice. In short, it's the outgoing artistic director Rufus Norris's answer to *War Horse* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, both huge hits for the theatre under previous incumbents.

'Dahl's stories are beloved far and wide, and the National Theatre makes work that speaks to, and of, our nation,' says Jenny Worton, artistic director of The Roald Dahl Story Company, which owns the rights to Dahl's archive and is co-producing *The Witches*. 'In terms of scale, reach and representation, Dahl and the National Theatre are a great match.'

All the same, Lizzie Clachan's set has apparently been designed to emulate a proscenium arch, evidence perhaps of the National's hope that the musical might transfer to the West End. 'We couldn't possibly say,' says Service with a smile, but anyone could be forgiven for suspecting such a move might be part of the plan. After all, the RSC's musical adaptation of Dahl's *Matilda* is now in its 13th year, 12 of them at the Cambridge Theatre in Covent Garden from where it shows no sign of budging. That show, with a book by Dennis Kelly, propelled the career of Bertie Carvel – who was so mesmerically repulsive in the role of Miss Trunchbull (the sadistic headteacher who persecutes the intellectually far superior Matilda with particular enthusiasm), I still can't think of it without shivers. Today, Tim Minchin's lyrics and music are known practically off by heart by almost every seven year old in the country. The musical was recently

PHOTOGRAPHY: Stock.adobe/Ahha Nenexa / National Theatre / Marc Brenner

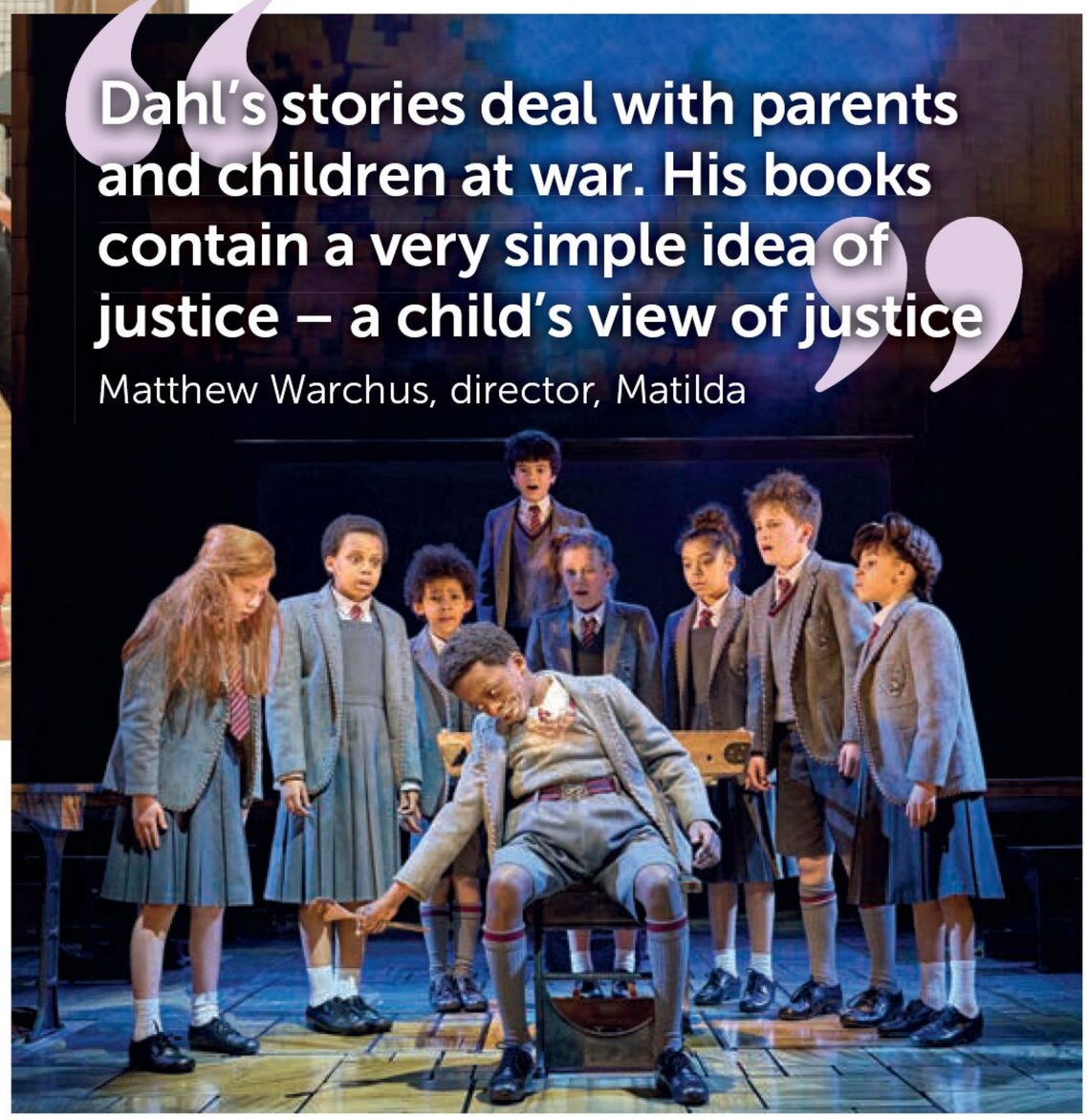
> **The mice have tiny remote-control cameras on their heads so that we witches avoid stepping on them**
>
> Zoe Birkett, Pippa (a witch), The Witches

turned into an unflinching film, starring Emma Thompson, by its original director Matthew Warchus. When it comes to Musical Theatre, not to mention film and TV, Dahl is big business.

And it's easy to see why. 'Dahl's stories deal with parents and children at war, to the extent it's as though they are different species,' says Warchus. 'His books contain a very simple idea of justice, a child's view of justice.'

'The child protagonist is always up against the forces of the adult world,' adds Worton. 'They are David versus Goliath stories, where children must use extraordinary bravery and imagination to overcome authority figures we are taught to believe should have moral integrity. Whilst the plots involve great plans and capers, at their heart the stories are fundamentally about social conflict: acts of rebellion against a malevolent force. And the stage does social conflict like no other form.'

Top Bobbie Little and Zoe Birkett **Above** Bertie Caplan (Luke) **Right** Sally Ann Triplett (Gran)



The Witches similarly pits a child against a hostile adult world, in this instance a young boy, Luke, who like so many of Dahl's young protagonists doesn't live with his parents, who died in a car accident, but with his Norwegian grandmother. Throughout his childhood she has thrilled him with stories of the murderous witches who conceal themselves throughout the world in female form, although they can be detected by virtue of their bald scalps, which they tuck away beneath wigs, and their claws, hidden beneath gloves. On holiday with his grandmother at a beachside hotel, the boy discovers that the hotel is unwittingly hosting the annual meeting of witches, in which The Grand High Witch (Katherine Kingsley in this production) reveals her plan to turn every child in England into a mouse by injecting sweets with her Formula 86 Delayed-Action Mouse-Maker. He is spotted, caught, and force-fed the mixture, turning into a mouse yet retaining his human personality. He manages to escape and, reunited with his grandmother, the pair hatch a plan to rid the world of witches forever.

There's no doubt that Dahl's world is a frightening one. Appalling things happen to repulsive adults – think of *The Twits*, who end their days glued upside down to the floor of their living room – but bad things happen to children, too. Not just the unpleasant ones, such as the greedy Augustus Gloop in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* who is sucked up a pipe into the fudge room, but the innocent ones: poor Bruce in *Matilda*, forced by Miss Trunchbull to eat an entire chocolate cake; the boy in *The Witches*, turned into a mouse. 'The darkness, or the intensity, in Dahl stems from the fact some stories don't always have a happy ending,' says Warchus. 'Children love that. But the message is also that the children in the books survive the brutality. They are scared, but they are also rebellious. If the aim of the adults in Dahl's world is to break a child's spirit, then what they realise is that it's impossible to do so.'

It's not just the fearlessness of Dahl's antic plots that make them such richly dramatic source material. His language is so pungent, so gleeful, so full of mischief and nonsense, that the wordplay feels almost physical. It has an anarchy about it that in the instance of *Matilda* beautifully suited the mischievous spirit of Minchin, a comedian and composer known for his linguistic dexterity. When we meet, Birkett, Service and Little have yet to hear Malloy's completed score for *The Witches* but they can tell me that in some instances they sing in an invented language, as befits Dahl's habit of freshly minting new words as he went along. And what they also know is that the score for their songs contains tritones. A tritone can be described as a mode or interval made up of three tones which when used in the scale of B, without getting too technical, creates an interval so dissonant it was once regarded as '*diabolus in musica*', ie, the devil in music and thus avoided as much as possible by superstitious 18th-century composers. 'If you were caught using it back then, you'd be killed,' says Service. 'You would literally be regarded as summoning the devil.'

Above Maggie Service and Ekow Quartey **Top right** Matilda's Bruce, post-chocolate cake

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner / Manuel Harlan

Above Fantastic Mr Fox at the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton, before touring **Below right** The UK touring production of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory

If this, then, is an instance of a composer bottling the subversive spirit of Dahl and decanting from it something new, then Dahl's novels for children don't always translate so effortlessly into the language of Musical Theatre. Like any page-to-stage translation, the trick is to capture the spirit of the original while also finding a fresh theatrical vocabulary. One of the criticisms levied against Sam Mendes's 2013 production of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, based on a book by David Greig and which ran at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane until 2017, was that it failed to achieve its own imagined world; another that it lacked dramatic impetus. That said, another production by James Brining has been touring the UK since February. Meanwhile Sam Holcroft's adaptation of *Fantastic Mr Fox*, with a jaunty score by Arthur Darvill [Curly in the UK premiere of Daniel Fish's *Oklahoma!*] and which went on a short tour after premiering at Nuffield Theatre Southampton in 2016, perhaps ought to have become a classic of the genre – revived each year at Christmas in the way of the Julia Donaldson classics such as *The Gruffalo* and *Stick Man* – but hasn't.

One perhaps overlooked reason for this, as Warchus points out, is that Dahl and the Musical Theatre form aren't quite the effortless, straightforward pairing they initially appear. 'The musical is a very sentimental art form,' he says. 'And I don't think you can say that about Roald Dahl.' He argues that, while *Matilda the Musical* owes a debt to *Oliver!*, and sits in the same tradition as musicals such as *Billy Elliot* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, on another level it sits entirely by itself. 'It's very different to *Annie*, for example. It finds a very different way of telling that sort of story.

'One loose rule of the Musical Theatre genre is that the lead character invariably has an 'I want' song, which tends to establish the expected narrative arc. But our Matilda doesn't have an 'I want' song. She's very self-sufficient. She doesn't actually want anything. What she deserves is better parents, but that's a different thing. Her big song is 'Naughty', which is not a song about hope but which instead offers a practical guide to survival. In many respects the rule-breaking ethos of the book is inculcated within Tim and Dennis's musical.'

Dahl understood that children see the darkness of life as much as adults do. There's no pretending

Bobbie Little, Emily (a witch), The Witches

You could argue that the story told in *The Witches* is similarly rule-breaking. After all – and close your eyes at this point if you have yet to encounter it – our hero remains a mouse. At the end of the book there is no magical restoration of his human form. There is no reassertion of the status quo. Instead, the boy lives out his life as a tiny animal, albeit still in the care of his grandmother. '*The Witches* is a love story,' says Little. 'It's about the love between a boy and his grandmother that is capable of surviving everything. But Dahl doesn't sugarcoat it. A terrible thing happens near the beginning of the book, and there's no getting round it. What makes Dahl so great is that he understood that children see the darkness of life as much as adults do. There's no pretending.' M

The Witches opened on 7 November and continues at the National Theatre until 27 January 2024 – for tickets, visit nationaltheatre.org.uk

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan / Johan Persson

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"A GAME-CHANGING IMMERSIVE PRODUCTION SIMPLY ASTONISHING"

Time Out

GUYS&DOLLS

A MUSICAL FABLE OF BROADWAY

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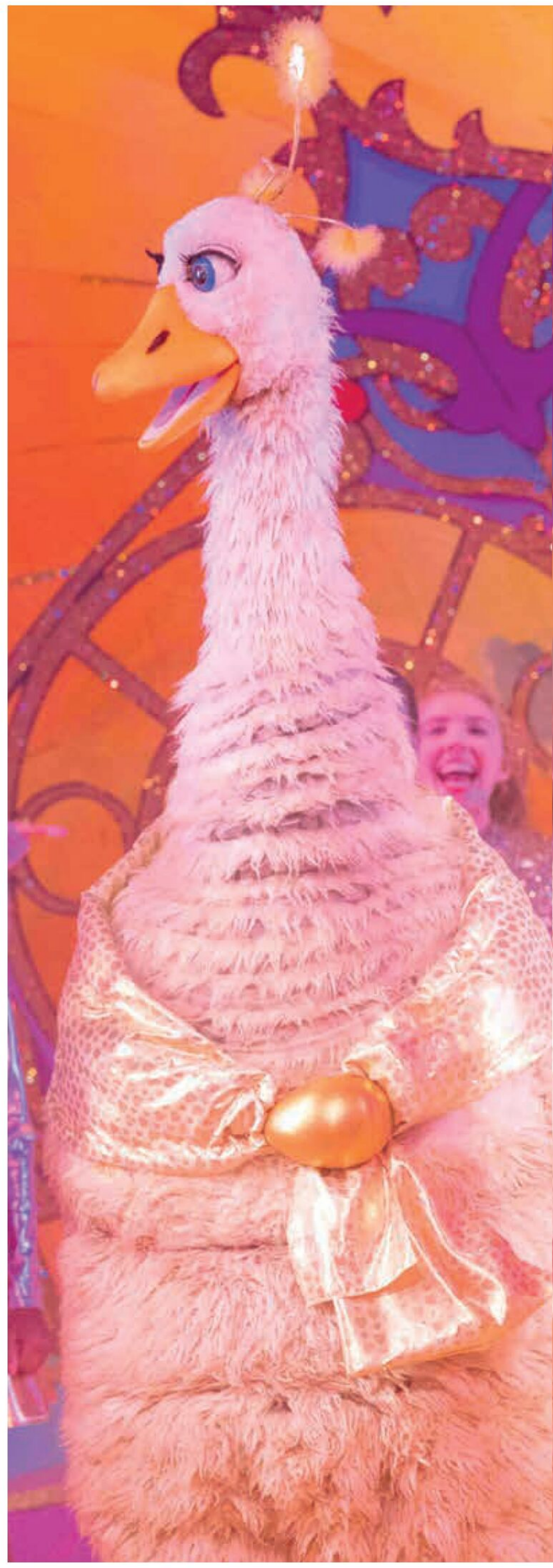
BR/DGE THEATRE

London Bridge

Photography: PEROU Design: mucc

There is Nothin' Like a Dame

When Sir Ian McKellen played Widow Twankey in 2004, it signalled a wave of high-profile performers, many from the Musical Theatre world, being drawn to the joy of pantomime. **Paul Vale** talks to artists and creatives about panto's ability to connect with audiences, and its crucial role in supporting the theatrical ecosystem



In 2004, the revered actor Sir Ian McKellen announced that he would be playing Widow Twankey in The Old Vic pantomime *Aladdin*. That might not seem such a big deal today, but back in the early noughties it signalled a watershed moment in the long history of British pantomime. With its strange traditions, cross-dressing and audience participation, pantomime had slid inexorably into a rut. Loved by audiences but often misunderstood by critics and even by some performers, panto was in desperate need of rebranding.

Since the '60s and '70s, the backbone of the modern pantomime had been made up from stars of the light-entertainment industry and comedians. In many theatres this is still the case, but more and more frequently, the rippling muscles beneath the skin of a pantomime are those of triple-threat Musical Theatre performers taking headline roles. And behind them are a whole network of creatives whose careers have long embraced both Musical Theatre and pantomime.

Producer and director Michael Harrison of Crossroads Pantomimes has garnered major successes with his West End musicals including, currently, *The Little Big Things* and Jamie Lloyd's

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan / Mark Senior

Above Clive Rowe, panto champ at Hackney Empire **Left** McKellen's panto roles have given the genre a boost

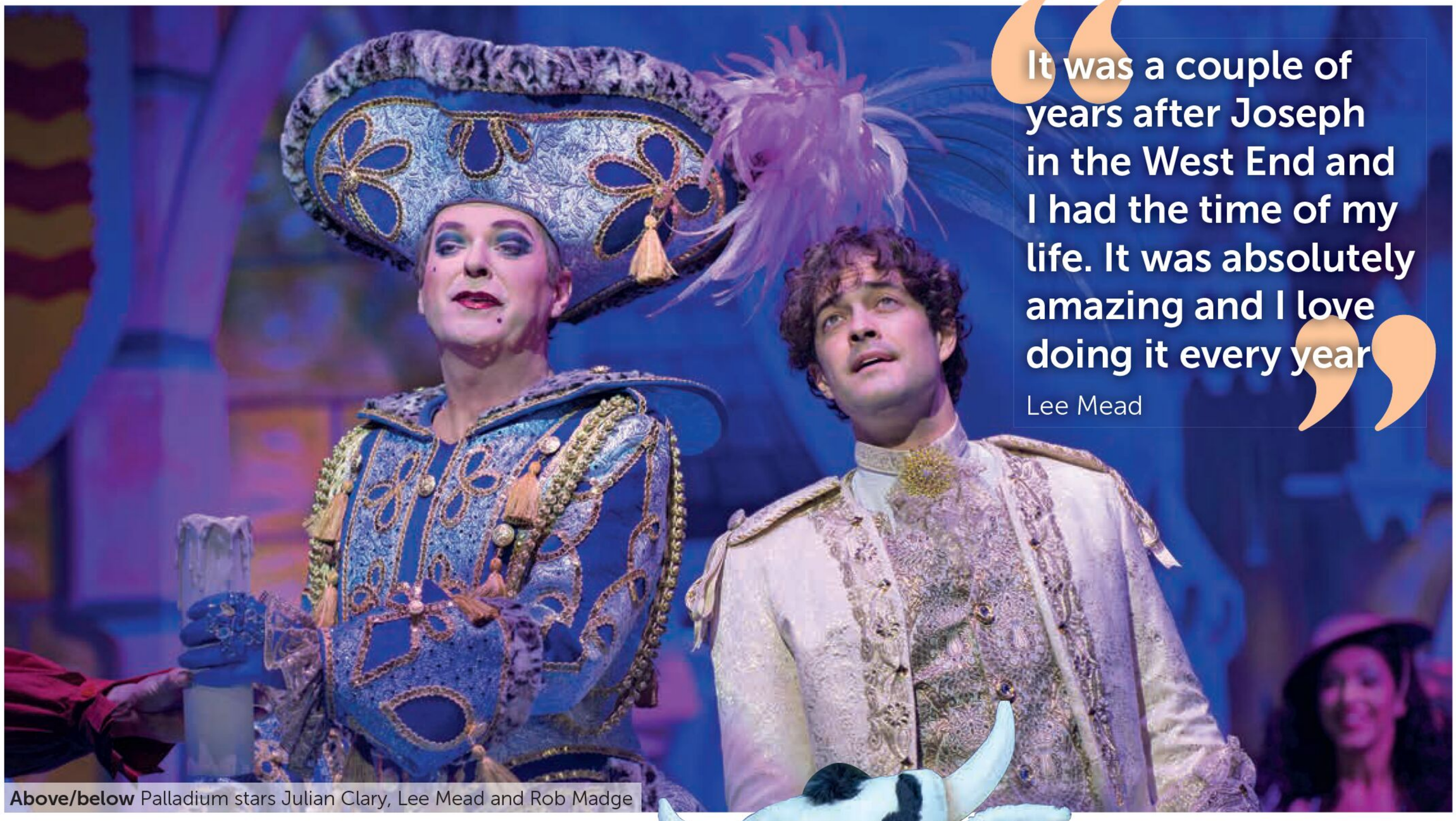
production of *Sunset Boulevard*. 'For me, pantomime came first. I mean, that's what I fell in love with as a little boy. For a long time there weren't many people who were working in pantomime and working in musicals at the same time.

'I did *Jack and The Beanstalk* in 2014 at the Birmingham Hippodrome with Jane McDonald and Duncan James. I was directing it, and when it came to choosing my choreographer I thought I'd like to get Drew McOnie. The fact that Drew said yes meant a lot of other people thought "Oh, it's not a terrible idea to go and do a panto. It's not going to damage my CV."

'It led to a whole load of Musical Theatre creatives working in pantomime. Choreographer Karen Bruce had won an Olivier for *Pacific Overtures* at the Donmar. She'd never done a pantomime. And I think then she did two with me in Birmingham, and she's done all but one with me at the Palladium.'

Since then, Harrison has attracted some of the biggest names in Musical Theatre to take part in his pantomimes. The landmark return of panto to the West End at the London Palladium in 2016 with *Cinderella* featured Lee Mead as Prince Charming – although this wasn't by any means the actor's first foray into fairyland.

'Over the years, there's maybe been a bit of a snobbery about doing panto – that it could affect your career if you are a leading man in musicals,' Mead suggests, who again this year is starring in *Cinderella*, this time in Hull. 'But I've never worried about what people think in terms of my career choices. I've always trusted my gut and I'm so pleased that I did my very first pantomime in 2012 with Paul Zerdin, Nigel Havers and Julian Clary, at the Mayflower Theatre in Southampton. It was a couple of years after *Joseph* in the West End and I had the time of my life. It was absolutely amazing and I love doing it every year. It's a heavy schedule obviously – 12 shows a week for three or four weeks – but you all muck in together and you do it for the audience.'



> It was a couple of years after Joseph in the West End and I had the time of my life. It was absolutely amazing and I love doing it every year
>
> Lee Mead

Above/below Palladium stars Julian Clary, Lee Mead and Rob Madge

The Palladium pantomime has, over the years, featured a host of major Musical Theatre talent, including Charlie Stemp, Emma Williams, Sophie Isaacs, Elaine Paige, Gary Wilmot, Natasha J Barnes and Louis Gaunt. Pantomime has become a huge draw for Musical Theatre performers who relish the opportunity to tell stories in different ways. Vivien Parry, who has recently finished a season as Fraulein Schneider in Rebecca Frecknall's *Cabaret* and is soon to star in *Aladdin* at Richmond Theatre, suggests 'I think what I get from performing in pantomime is a chance to be camp. Truly larger than life. Everything I do onstage is very truthful. Even doing a musical, it's still very, very truth-based. So, for me, panto is a chance to just be a bit more of a showgirl, just a bit more Shirley Bassey rather than Helen Mirren. It sort of brings out my inner cruise ship singer.'

Conversely, sometimes pantomime is already a natural fit for a Musical Theatre performer. Wendy Mae Brown, also starring in Richmond's *Aladdin* and who has won acclaim for roles in *Waitress* and *Ghost*, laughs at her introduction to pantomime. 'I must say that, in my Musical Theatre world, I do tend to play over-the-top characters anyway. So when they wanted me to play the Empress in *Aladdin* two years ago, they said "Let's get Wendy, she'll nail it."

'When I walk on and the children are terrified, all that sort of thing, I love it. I've never met anybody who's done panto and hated it. They get tired, yes, because it's hard work, but they never say they hate it.'

And it's not just in London, as we've already seen. All over the UK this year, Musical Theatre stars – such as Carrie Hope Fletcher (*Sleeping Beauty*, Crawley) and Courtney Bowman (*Aladdin*, Canterbury) – are headlining in traditional pantomimes. Producer and director Paul Hendy at Evolution Pantomimes suggests that West End credentials are a benchmark.

'I think people equate the West End performer with quality. If you see that somebody has performed on the West End stage, they're good. There's been a big change in pantomime over the last 15 or 20 years and a lot of that has to do with the people being used. Producers are investing a lot more money on sets and costumes but also in the players. Performers like Carrie and Courtney attract new audiences, who will come along and realise that pantomime isn't just for kids or families, but for everyone.'

Rob Madge might well be considered a veteran of musicals – they made their first appearances, in *Mary Poppins* and *Les Misérables*, as a child, and more recently they have performed in the *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* tour and their own *My Son's a Queer (But what can you do?)*. This year Madge stars in *Peter Pan* at the London Palladium. The segue into pantomime was, they say, almost inevitable.

'I think I learned so much about comedy in musicals. The roles that I've played, they've always been colourful, larger than life, and that's perfect for pantomime. I'd say one of the biggest things I've taken away is how to foster a relationship with your audience.

'I think sometimes when we perform, we can forget that we're having a shared experience between audience and performer. Panto and Musical Theatre especially really value that relationship.'

That relationship with the audience is a key feature for anybody working on pantomime, whether they're a performer or a creative. Pantomime is packed with traditions and conventions that baffle many newcomers, but ultimately it's

PHOTOGRAPHY: Paul Coltas/Steve Williams / Perou / Benjamin Mole

this audience connection that makes pantomime so special. Robert Hyman is a composer and lyricist, who has been creating original pantomimes for the Theatre Royal Stratford East for 25 years. He has noticed how some of these conventions are becoming a staple of modern theatregoing. 'Young audiences enjoy the speed, the energy of a pantomime,' Hyman says. 'They love the fact that, unlike the TV, unlike their phones, the characters actually come out onstage and talk to them directly. And there's the joy. It's like, "Oh, wait a minute, you're talking to me?" So the more the audiences can participate in the show, the better the experience is. And I think the West End is learning this because more and more immersive shows are taking place than ever before.'

From the early days of pantomime, the music used generally featured popular songs and operetta standards. Today's sophisticated audiences are thirsty for new work, however, and composers like Hyman at Stratford and Tom Self at the Queen's Theatre Hornchurch strive for original songs to tempt young palettes. 'What's lovely about doing pantomime with original music is that you can continue to tell the story through the song,' adds Self. 'In a lot of conventional pantos they're telling a great story until they hit a Britney Spears song. And then they're trying to tell that story through Britney Spears lyrics. I love Britney, but this change can feel a little disjointed. So it's lovely that our original songs can follow more of a Musical Theatre trajectory. The song continues the story rather than interrupting the narrative.'

> **Panto is a chance to just be a bit more of a showgirl, just a bit more Shirley Bassey rather than Helen Mirren. It sort of brings out my inner cruise ship singer**
>
> Vivien Parry

That need to tell a story is paramount for acclaimed director Thom Southerland, who now regularly turns his hand to directing pantomime at the Mayflower Theatre in Southampton. 'I have tried to approach Musical Theatre the same way that people would approach a play. Look at the material, intention, motivation of characters. With pantomime it's completely different. Although I'm a stickler for a story, even within a panto – we have to understand story and the way that the story is told – everything else, I think, goes out the window. It's my Christmas treat.'

Pantomime is a Christmas treat for multiple theatre-goers too, even those who don't usually make a habit of buying theatre tickets. For many families, in fact, panto is the one and only time they will walk through the doors of their local theatre. In that respect, Vikki Stone, author and composer of this year's *Cinderella* at the Lyric Hammersmith, is under no illusions as to the importance of the pantomime within theatre's ecology. 'Pantomime pays the bills. That's the elephant in the room. We do pantomime and it pays the bills because more people come to see it than anything else. It kind of bugs me that there's no pantomime category at the Oliviers or the WhatsOnStage Awards. It's like, why do we pretend that this thing that keeps our industry alive financially doesn't exist? It's about time it got the recognition it deserves for what it does for the industry as a whole. Because we wouldn't have a functioning landscape without panto.'

Actor, Musical Theatre performer and director Clive Rowe, who stars in and directs this year's *Aladdin* at the Hackney Empire, has probably done more than any other performer to raise awareness of the power of panto in sustaining the theatre industry. An Olivier Award winner who was also nominated for his *Mother Goose* in 2008, Rowe has very strong views on the relationship between pantomime and Musical Theatre 'Put simply, Musical Theatre and pantomime are the same thing. As an actor foremost, I approach every job in the same way. I look for the narrative truth and pursue that with my character. I get onstage and if I'm meant to be funny, I try to be funny. If I'm meant to show pathos, then I pursue the pathos. You do it within the realms of the structure you are

Above Kat B, Aladdin, Hackney Empire **Below** Richmond Theatre's current Dick Whittington cast: Wendy Mae Brown, Suki Webster, Paul Merton and Vivien Parry

working in. In Musical Theatre, one might have a more intricate and complicated narrative, whereas in pantomime it's just condensed. It's just a different journey, but the end product is the same.' He references McKellen, whose 2004 panto appearance sparked a continued love of the genre – only last year, he played the title role in *Mother Goose* in the West End and on tour 'I always doff my cap to him,' Rowe says. 'One of the best known actors in the world, and he headlined a nine-month pantomime tour last year.'

While Rowe doesn't uniformly cast Musical Theatre performers, it sometimes just happens that way. It helps if they're strong vocalists – and if they're in the ensemble they will need to dance, so it's likely that Musical Theatre professionals will have that training and stamina. It's also worth noting that the run is usually at the height of winter, when we are all susceptible to coughs and colds. Any ensemble member has to be strong enough to understudy and still give the audience their money's worth.

There is a consensus among performers that, despite its simplistic reputation, panto is hard graft that requires talent, dedication and stamina. For the Musical Theatre performer, it's no longer considered an awkward career move but a challenge that draws on all their training and experience to date. In theatre's delicate ecosystem, pantomime is a vital source of income that fuels new writing and enables new productions. No wonder Musical Theatre artists are increasingly embracing its eccentricities with the respect that it deserves. M

It's panto time! Shows to catch near you

Aladdin
Fairfield Halls, Croydon
16 December 2023 – 7 January 2024
fairfield.co.uk

Aladdin
Hackney Empire, London
30 November – 31 December 2023
hackneyempire.co.uk

Aladdin
The Marlowe, Canterbury
30 November 2023 – 7 January 2024
marlowetheatre.com

Beauty and the Beast
Lyceum Theatre, Sheffield
8 December 2023 – 7 January 2024
sheffieldtheatres.co.uk

Cinderella
Churchill Theatre, Bromley
2-31 December 2023
trafalgartickets.com

Cinderella
Hull New Theatre
16 December 2023 – 7 January 2024
hulltheatres.co.uk

Cinderella
Lyric Hammersmith, London
30 November 2023 – 6 January 2024
lyric.co.uk

Cinderella
Milton Keynes Theatre
9 December 2023 – 14 January 2024
atgtickets.com

Cinderella
New Wimbledon Theatre, London
8 December 2023 – 7 January 2024
atgtickets.com

Dick Whittington
Queen's Theatre Hornchurch
30 November – 31 December 2023
queens-theatre.co.uk

Dick Whittington
Richmond Theatre, London
9 December 2023 – 7 January 2024
atgtickets.com

Dick Whittington
Theatre Royal Nottingham
9 December 2023 – 14 January 2024
trch.co.uk

Goldilocks and the Three Bears
Plymouth Theatre Royal
15 December 2023 – 13 January 2024
atgtickets.com

Jac and the Beanstalk
New Theatre, Cardiff
9 December 2023 – 7 January 2024
newtheatrecardiff.co.uk

Jack and the Beanstalk
Birmingham Hippodrome
16 December 2023 – 28 January 2024
birminghamhippodrome.com

Jack and the Beanstalk
Manchester Opera House
2-31 December 2023
atgtickets.com

Jack and the Beanstalk
Theatre Royal Stratford East, London
30 November 2023 – 6 January 2024
stratfordeast.com

Peter Pan
Bristol Hippodrome
2-31 December 2023
atgtickets.com

Peter Pan
London Palladium
9 December 2023 – 14 January 2024
palladiumpantomime.com

Peter Pan
New Victoria Theatre, Woking
8 December 2023 – 7 January 2024
atgtickets.com

Sleeping Beauty
The Hawth Crawley
8-31 December 2023
parkwoodtheatres.co.uk

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs
Darlington Hippodrome
8-31 December 2023
darlingtonhippodrome.co.uk

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs
Mayflower Theatre, Southampton
9-31 December 2023
mayflower.org.uk

Left Christopher Biggins as Snow White's Man in the Mirror at the Mayflower Theatre, Southampton

PHOTOGRAPHY: Stuart Martin

THE PHEASANTRY

CHELSEA

London's award-winning cabaret room, The Pheasantry, has re-opened following refurbishment. Come down to this intimate venue on the King's Road for world class music from stars of Musical Theatre and New York Cabaret including West End legends Bonnie Langford, Marti Webb and Janie Dee.

13th to 15th October
Steve Ross

19th to 22nd October
Andrea Marcovicci & Maude Maggart

30th to 31st October
KT Sullivan

22nd to 25th November
Ann Hampton Callaway

8th to 9th December
Christina Bianco

19th to 20th December
Marti Webb

THE PIANO LOUNGE

COVENT GARDEN

The Piano Lounge, PizzaExpress Live's newest venue, is based in the heart of the West End, close to Covent Garden, Soho and 'Theatreland'. Every Thursday and Friday night, you can expect to be entertained by top quality pianists and singers, with special guest performers from the worlds of jazz, soul and musical theatre.

PIZZAEXPRESS Live

pizzaexpresslive.com

THE PHEASANTRY, 150–152 KINGS ROAD, LONDON SW3 4UT

THE PIANO LOUNGE, 80–81 ST MARTIN'S LANE, LONDON WC2N 4AA

The 20 best shows of 2023

To close the year in the style, we've chosen 20 standout Musical Theatre shows from the past 12 months – which will come out on top? **Marianka Swain** counts us down...

We couldn't have chosen a more exciting time to launch *Musicals* magazine as a regular bi-monthly publication. This past year has been a fantastic period for Musical Theatre, from thrilling new work to powerful revivals, from the West End to fringe and regional powerhouses, plus, as our critics across the pond have reported, on and Off Broadway.

To give you an idea of that sheer range, we've rounded up our favourite musical productions of 2023, as assessed by our expert team of reviewers, quoted throughout. It's not yet quite the end of the calendar year, so apologies to shows with exciting potential like *The Witches*, *Spamalot*, *Evita* and *The Time Traveller's Wife*, which hadn't opened at the time of writing – we'll be reviewing those in future issues (and in fact you can read our *TTW* review on page 56).

However, we're thrilled to champion productions as diverse as homegrown hit *Standing at the Sky's Edge* (heading into the West End after its Sheffield and National Theatre runs), the remarkable Bridge Theatre revival of *Guys & Dolls*, the bold jukebox musical *Head Over Heels* at Manchester's Hope Mill, and the immersive disco-framed *Here Lies Love* on Broadway.

What will take the top spot in the very first of what we hope will be a regular annual round-up – and will it match your favourite? Without further ado, here is our tremendous Top 20. M

20 Head Over Heels

Hope Mill Theatre

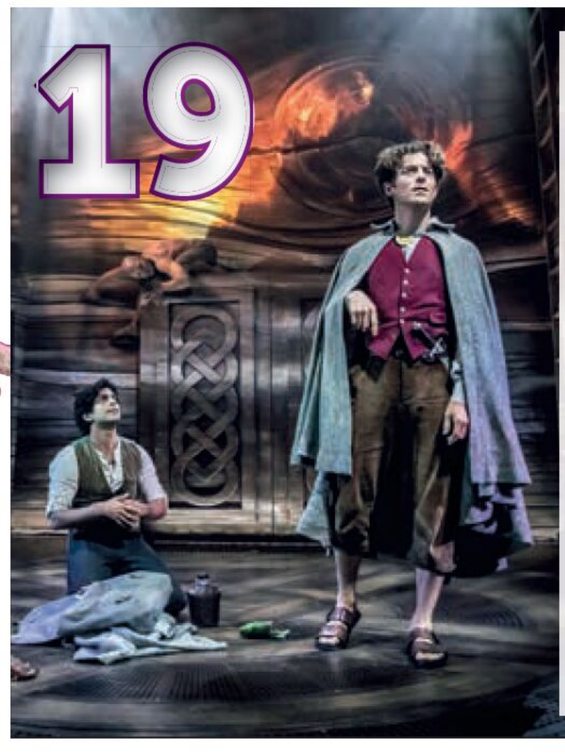
26 Jan – 4 Mar 2023

It was well worth the wait for the European premiere of Jeff Whitty and James Magruder's inventive show, which fuses a 16th-century romance with the music of The Go-Go's. It found its 'natural home' at Manchester's Hope Mill, declared our reviewer Mark Brown, who loved Tom Jackson Greaves's 'gorgeously rough, camp and punky production'.

19 Lord of the Rings

Watermill Theatre

25 Jul – 15 Oct 2023



Newbury's idyllic outdoor setting was equally sympatico with Tolkein's fantasy world according to Matthew Hemley, who praised Paul Hart's actor-muso reinvention of this West End flop: the cast brought out 'the harmonies of AR Rahman, Värttinä and Christopher Nightingale's score', and the show was filled with magic.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Stock.adobe/exvanesko / Pamela Raith

18 The Little Big Things

@sohoplace 2 Sep 2023 – 2 Mar 2024

Nick Butcher, Tom Ling and Joe White's heartfelt dramatisation of Henry Fraser's remarkable life story, directed by Luke Sheppard, features talented wheelchair-using performers like Ed Larkin and Amy Trigg among its inclusive cast. Reviewer Scott Matthewman called the show 'a reflection of Fraser: undaunted, funny, kind, unflinching, inspirational without ever being patronising'.

17 La Cage aux Folles

Regent's Park Open Air Theatre

29 Jul – 23 Sep 2023

Artistic director Timothy Sheader's very personal swan song was Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein's landmark queer musical with a mature and loving gay partnership at its centre. Forty years on, it somehow spoke to the moment; as critic Lisa Martland wrote: 'The nightclub numbers are hugely entertaining, but alongside all the fun and frolics there is a deeply moving story of love, family and acceptance.'

16 Assassins

Chichester Festival Theatre

3-24 Jun 2023

One of several productions grappling with Stephen Sondheim's mighty legacy, Polly Findlay's unsettling revival placed his tale of US presidential assassins firmly in Trump territory. As I wrote in our review: 'It's the American Dream turned American Nightmare as impotent fury curdles into self-justified violence.' A blistering cast found the humanity in the darkness.

15 Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends

Gielgud Theatre 16 Sep 2023 – 6 Jan 2024

Cameron Mackintosh has extended his one-night-only celebration into a spectacular full run. It brilliantly demonstrates Sondheim's bravura writing for women – as showcased by Lea Salonga, Bernadette Peters *et al*. Reviewer Matt Wolf (see page 52) waxes lyrical about the 'aching *tristesse*' with which Peters reinvents standards like 'Send in the Clowns'.

14 Sunset Boulevard

Savoy Theatre

21 Sep 2023 – 6 Jan 2024

The casting of ex-Pussycat Doll Nicole Scherzinger is one of several masterstrokes on Jamie Lloyd's part (though Rachel Tucker is equally mind-blowing), illustrating the absurdity of Hollywood's youth fixation. Overall, it's a thrilling take on Lloyd Webber, Don Black and Christopher Hampton's fable (see our review on page 54).

13 Mrs Doubtfire

Shaftesbury Theatre

12 May 2023 – 29 Sep 2024

John O'Farrell and Wayne and Karey Kirkpatrick's feel-good adaptation of the Robin Williams movie, directed by Jerry Zaks, continues to impress with its genuinely engaging and varied theatrical numbers.

Our critic Cheryl Markosky loved the disco makeover and Riverdance nightmare, but especially 'the unrestrained flamenco' where Daniel, aka Mrs Doubtfire, frantically swaps personas in a Spanish restaurant.

12 Everybody's Talking About Jamie

UK tour 7 Sep 2023 – 20 Jul 2024

It's a joy to see Dan Gillespie Sells and Tom MacRae's gloriously inclusive musical reaching new audiences around the country on this tour. They're also getting a real star turn in Ivano Turco according to Chris Bartlett, who reviewed the show in Salford: Turco, with his 'mega-watt smile' has 'possibly the strongest voice' of any Jamie so far and also 'nails the character's insecurities'. Ultimately, though, Jonathan Butterell's production is 'life-enhancing' and showcases the show in 'possibly its rudest health yet'.

11 Here Lies Love

Broadway Theatre

17 Jun – 26 Nov 2023

This unusual Imelda Marcos bio-musical uses 'a mash-up of dance floor rave-up [with a score by David Byrne and Fatboy Slim], Filipino cultural celebration and cautionary true tale'. That summation comes from our critic Jim Munson, who loved how Alex Timbers's transformation of the New York venue into a disco made the show feel 'like an event.'

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith / Mark Senior / Johan Persson /Danny Kaan / Marc Brenner / Manuel Harlan /Matt Crockett / Billy Bustamante, Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman

10

A Strange Loop

Barbican 17 Jun – 9 Sep 2023

Michael R Jackson's Tony and Pulitzer winner, helmed by Stephen Brackett, made an explosive UK debut. The marvellous Kyle Ramar Freeman starred as the plus-sized gay Black man writing a show in this 'metatheatrical fantasia', as reviewer Matt Wolf put it. He added that 'Jackson's score manages to be pointed, funny and infinitely poignant... a most miraculous loop indeed.'

8

Next to Normal

Donmar Warehouse

14 Aug – 7 Oct 2023

It took 14 years for Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey's Tony winner to reach the UK. Thankfully, Michael Longhurst's psychologically astute and utterly heart-rending production did it full justice, with Caissie Levy 'an inspired choice', per Matt Wolf's review, for the suburban mother dealing with mental illness while trying to hold on to her family.

9

Parade

Bernard B Jacobs Theatre

21 Feb – 6 Aug 2023

Michael Arden gifted Broadway audiences with 'an almost note-perfect production' of Jason Robert Brown and Alfred Uhry's work, about a Jewish man (played by Ben Platt) falsely accused of murder by an antisemitic community. Reviewer Thom Geier's observations tragically ring truer than ever: 'This searing revival serves as both history lesson and alarm bell.'

7

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

Southwark Playhouse

22 May – 1 Jul 2023

Sometimes, a show sneaks up on you – and this enchanting folk-scored gem certainly did that for critic Julia Rank. Darren Clark and Jethro Compton's Cornish-set actor-musician adaptation of F Scott Fitzgerald's eccentric yarn, led by Jamie Parker and Molly Osborne, was 'a true tearjerker, in the best sense,' she enthused. 'Let's hope it's just a matter of time before a wider public gets the chance to experience Mr Benjamin Button in his prime.'

6

Shucked

Nederlander Theatre

8 Mar 2023 – 14 Jan 2024

No one saw this coming, either: Broadway's biggest new hit (coming soon to the West End) is all about corn. Reviewer Thom Geier was won over by Robert Horn, Brandy Clark and Shane McAnally's country-twinged creation: 'It's that rare musical comedy offering a harvest of tuneful treats and a bumper crop of genuine laughs'.

5

Groundhog Day

Old Vic

20 May –19 Aug 2023

Tim Minchin and Danny Rubin's musical version of the beloved existentialist film comedy returned to where it first premiered seven years ago. Director Matthew Warchus again served up a 'huge blast of slickness, sight gags and illusions', but the inextricable book and score were 'the twin stars' for critic Tim Bano: 'knotty, messy and, fittingly, worth revisiting over and over again.'

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner / Joan Marcus / Juan Coolio / Matthew Murphy Evan Zimmerman / Manuel Harlan / Matt Crockettt / Johan Persson

4 Operation Mincemeat

Fortune Theatre
29 Mar 2023 – 15 Jun 2024

SpitLip's ingenious dramatisation of an extraordinary real-life secret wartime operation has more than earned its spot in the West End. It's proof, cheered Matt Wolf in his review, that 'super shows can come in small packages'. Under Robert Hastie's sure direction, this multi-roling, gender-flipped show is 'knockabout and larky one minute, surprisingly moving the next'. God, that's brilliant!

3 Guys & Dolls

Bridge Theatre
3 Mar 2023 – 31 Aug 2024

Nicholas Hytner uses his flexible venue to plunge audiences right into the fabled New York of Frank Loesser, Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows's peerless musical comedy – all the better to appreciate a magnificent cast doing full justice to that irrepressible score. I emerged on a total high, and no wonder: 'Any musical that ends with a mass dance party is surely doing something right.'

2 Standing at the Sky's Edge

National Theatre 9 Feb – 25 Mar 2023

Originating at Sheffield Crucible, and now heading to the West End, Chris Bush's inspired show (using the inimitable music of Richard Hawley that has 'the looming sense of foreboding that one might expect from a meaty Rodgers and Hammerstein score') made a crucial stop at the National. Its stirring, state-of-the-nation tale of three generations living on Sheffield's brutalist post-war Park Hill estate greatly impressed reviewer Scott Matthewman, who hailed a cast 'overflowing with female talent': 'It will take a slice of Sheffield steel out into the wider world,' he sagely noted.

1 Crazy for You

Gillian Lynne Theatre
24 Jun – 31 Dec 2023

Led by a remarkable talent in Charlie Stemp, Susan Stroman's stupendous Gershwin revival (which began in Chichester in 2022) is pure tap heaven – the Golden Age of musicals reborn. 'Throughout, Stroman balances loving homages with thrillingly inventive work,' I proclaimed, and ecstatic audiences have agreed. Who could ask for anything more?

Live show reviews

The most exciting and significant performances of new and recently revived productions in the UK, the US and further afield, all reviewed in detail by our panel of Musical Theatre experts

Close-Up: The Twiggy Musical

Various music, lyrics **Ben Elton** book
Menier Chocolate Factory, London 18 September – 18 November 2023
REVIEWED ON 27 SEPTEMBER 2023

UK LIVE SHOWS

Steven Serlin and Hannah-Jane Fox as Twiggy's parents; Elena Skye's Twiggy with other members of the company, and (far right) sporting that 1960s iconic look

Lesley Hornby, aka Twiggy, shot to fame in 1966 as a 16-year-old model with her doe eyes, gamine haircut and androgynous build. She became the face of the Swinging Sixties and an emblem of social mobility.

Neasden-born Twiggy has worn many hats since her four-year modelling career, including film star, pop singer, television host, Tony-nominated Musical Theatre performer and Dame of the British Empire who apparently saved Marks & Spencer. She's also experienced her share of hardships, but she isn't the most compelling Musical Theatre protagonist – at least, not according to *Close-Up: The Twiggy Musical*, written and directed by her friend Ben Elton with a male-dominated creative team.

Elton employs a hagiographic whistle-stop tour through the first 30-odd years of Twiggy's life framed with jokey fourth wall-breaking narration and 2023 knowingness. A social history of the 1940s through to the 1980s is illustrated in clumsy mascara-smudged brushstrokes, interspersed with patronising bite-sized lessons in feminism explaining terms such as body-shaming, the male gaze and gaslighting.

The show is performed against Timothy Bird's photo-studio set that's illuminated by Tim Blazdell's video projections, and Jonathan Lipman provides a whirl of psychedelic costumes. In the title role, Elena Skye is game and looks the part, though the bad wigs don't do her any favours. She has a strong rock voice and conveys a down-to-earth Cockney attitude, turning the tables when dismissed by influential men as an airheaded model. Strangely, her modelling career, while short, is brushed over and we only fleetingly get a sense of what a phenomenon she was.

Aoife Dunne and Lauren Azania AJ King-Yombo are likeable as Twiggy's childhood friends Cindy and Kay, and Steven Serlin brings warmth to Twiggy's Lancastrian father Norman, a lifelong self-educator. Her mother Nell (Hannah-Jane Fox) experienced PTSD after being bombed out in the Blitz and then post-natal depression after Twiggy's birth. Elton elucidates this by having her warble songs by Vera Lynn and The Andrews Sisters.

> "Elena Skye has a strong rock voice and conveys down-to-earth Cockney attitude"

The hodgepodge of vintage pop songs, with chaotic music video-style choreography by Jacob Fearey, is vigorously performed but the musical numbers serve as diversions rather than developing the story. With introductions like 'This was popular when my mum had Electric Shock Therapy', they lean towards the literal: 'Downtown' for shopping in Biba and 'Just One Look' for Twiggy's iconic haircut. The best is probably the playground jive to 'Bony Maronie'.

Particularly distasteful is the syrupy 'Take Good Care of My Baby' when Twiggy's parents entrust her to the care of smarmy 'Svengali' businessman Justin de Villeneuve (Matt Corner). They started sleeping together when she was 15 and he was 25. The 'sexy schoolgirl' was an accepted fixture in popular culture back then, Twiggy explains.

De Villeneuve is treated rather generously as a love-to-hate comic turn, while Twiggy's sinister encounter with record producer Phil Spector, later a convicted murderer, is played for laughs. 'I dodged that bullet,' she congratulates herself.

The second half is dominated by Twiggy's relationship with Michael Witney (a hammy Darren Day in the worst wig of the show), an ageing, alcoholic cowboy actor. Bizarrely, Elton seems more interested in showcasing the tiresomely self-destructive Witney than Twiggy herself.

Originally an aspiring designer, Twiggy despairs at being conned by the production of cheap tat with her name on it. Similarly, this show is raggedly pieced together. Like a puff piece in a celebrity magazine, it's colourful and bubbly on the surface but it doesn't do to look too closely.

Julia Rank

Production credits

Cast Elena Skye, Steven Serlin, Hannah-Jane Fox, Aoife Dunne, Beth Devine, Lauren Azania AJ King-Yombo, Matt Corner, Darren Day *et al*
Direction Ben Elton
Musical direction, supervision Stuart Morley
Choreography, movement direction Jacob Fearey
Set Timothy Bird
Lighting Philip Gladwell
Sound Gregory Clarke
Costumes Jonathan Lipman
Video Tim Blazdell

PHOTOGRAPHY: Manuel Harlan

Flowers for Mrs Harris

Richard Taylor music, lyrics **Rachel Wagstaff** book
Riverside Studios, London 30 September – 25 November 2023
REVIEWED ON 5 OCTOBER 2023

Annie Wensak, in the role of Violet, encourages Jenna Russell's Ada to follow her dream; Charlotte Kennedy models the Dior style; Hal Fowler plays Ada's husband

A sweet scent of old-fashioned charm infuses *Flowers for Mrs Harris*, based on Paul Gallico's 1958 novel, in its first London run at Riverside Studios. Debuting in Sheffield back in 2016, Richard Taylor and Rachel Wagstaff's musical was then performed at Chichester Festival Theatre two years later. And in 2022, audiences were enchanted by the (non-musical) film *Mrs Harris Goes to Paris*, starring Lesley Manville, Isabelle Huppert and Jason Isaacs.

Only the hard-hearted wouldn't be won over by an exuberant fairy tale about widowed Battersea charlady Ada Harris (a quietly commanding Jenna Russell) who falls in love with a couture Christian Dior dress she discovers at the home of wealthy employer Lady Dant (Kelly Price at her most imperious). Mesmerised – 'it's something to make you feel' – Ada is determined to have one of her own, even though it costs a year's wages. With the help of friend/fellow charlady Violet (a droll portrayal by Annie Wensak), much cleaning, mending and luck results in Ada finally going to Paris to claim her Dior gown.

Although this is essentially a feelgood 'will Cinderella go to the ball?' show, there are a number of deeper themes explored, including class, loss, loneliness, kindness and love. Director Bronagh Lagan evokes a melancholy, post-war era when Londoners continued to experience rationing and the after-effects of injury, relocation and bereavement (Ada loses her beloved Albert, who appears as an amiable ghost).

Flowers for Mrs Harris is less Musical Theatre and more operetta in style with through-singing and counterpoint. Musical director, conductor and keyboard player Jonathan Gill conducts his band of six with enthusiasm – maybe a bit too much in the first half, as the lyrics are sometimes masked.

But it's worth sticking with the production for the second act where the sound mix is more sympathetic, Ada gets to Paris and in her self-effacing way helps people connect with one another. Here, the production finds its soul.

> "You might not exit humming the tunes, but you'll leave with a tear in your eye"

Although Russell dominates throughout, this is an ensemble piece with an excellent cast, most of whom double up roles – including Charlotte Kennedy playing spoilt wannabe actress Pamela in London, as well as Parisian model Natasha, who dreams of a simpler life. Hal Fowler, who is both Ada's late husband Albert and the Marquis de Chassagne, stands out with his clear delivery and rich tones. He also joins Russell in the beautiful duet, 'Rain on Me'. You might not exit the theatre humming any memorable tunes, but you'll leave with a tear in your eye.

Nik Corrall's set design consists of a row of South London houses, the central one on a revolve, with laundry hanging in alleyways. This transforms into a dreamy Parisian arrondissement by the clever appearance of Gallic-style painted house numbers and drapes, and lighting by Adam King that adds verve and colour.

Sara Perks's splendid costumes run the gamut from Ada and Violet's simple, workaday frocks and pinnies to Lady Dant's peach-coloured twinset, pencil skirt and pearls, and Dior manager Madame Colbert's elegant, figure-hugging attire. And hats off to gown designer Lez Brotherston and movement director Anjali Mehra for the showstopping, artistic highlight: a dazzling parade of dresses in the Dior show scene. The audience is spellbound watching the models bedecked in these shimmering works of art.

Flowers for Mrs Harris deserves all the bouquets bestowed upon it. It's not just a tale of a lonely woman hankering after a designer creation. It's about how everyone – 'We're all the same at heart, aren't we?' insists Ada – should be able to follow their dreams, whether they are starting a new career, trying to tell someone they love them, or wanting to enjoy a picnic with a slice of chocolate cake. And knowing it's time to stop and smell the roses.

Cheryl Markosky

Production credits

Cast Jenna Russell, Hal Fowler, Annie Wensak, Kelly Price, Nathanael Campbell, Charlotte Kennedy *et al*
Direction Bronagh Lagan
Musical direction Jonathan Gill
Original orchestrations Richard Taylor
New orchestrations Jason Carr
Movement direction Anjali Mehra
Set Nik Corrall
Lighting Adam King
Sound Charlie Smith
Costumes Sara Perks
Dior-style gowns Lez Brotherston

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

The Good Enough Mums Club

Verity Quade music **Chris Passey** additional music
Emily Beecher lyrics, book
Birmingham Hippodrome 25-28 October 2023, then touring
REVIEWED ON 27 OCTOBER 2023

Equally impressive: Amy Ross as Sophie with Jade Samuels playing Chantel; Joanna Kirkland's Bea is looked on by Belinda Wollaston as Esme; the full company

The question that creator and writer Emily Beecher was asked most often when pitching *The Good Enough Mums Club* to producers was: 'Why isn't there a man in it?' Shows with all-female casts are rare and shows about motherhood are even rarer; if a mother appears on stage, she is often there primarily to further the story of a son or husband. This production, which has just made its world premiere in Birmingham, is a refreshing change, putting the joys, traumas and absurdities of motherhood centre stage.

The idea for the show came from Beecher's experience of postnatal depression and postnatal psychosis. Once she started to share her diagnosis with other mothers, she found they were all struggling in different ways, and over the past decade she's spoken with mothers across the country, whose stories have influenced the development of the show's five characters.

These women meet at their local playgroup, all putting on a happy face, but as their community centre is threatened with closure, they are forced to address their private struggles and come together to save their space.

It's clear from the opening number, a witty pastiche of *Chicago*'s 'Cell Block Tango' which graphically details the physical and emotional changes that take place during pregnancy, that this show isn't pulling any punches. It's frank and unapologetic throughout, whether it's dealing with burning questions like why children's television is so weird, or tackling serious issues like child loss or the cost of living crisis.

The opening also gives us the first taste of Natasha Harrison's entertaining choreography, featuring everything from prams to oversized teddy bears. It works well in the mostly open space of Libby Todd's bright, blocky set, which feels like a universal playgroup.

The cast does an outstanding job of conveying the camaraderie between the mums, the quiet tensions underlying their interactions, and their eventual love for each other as they learn to support rather than judge. Jade Samuels is a force of nature as Brummie single mum Chantel, commanding the stage with her bold body language and rapping with perfect precision. She's the polar opposite of Joanna Kirkland's restrained, brittle group leader Bea, a perfectionist who's hiding the breakdown of her marriage. Kirkland lets Bea slowly, quietly unravel to devastating effect.

> "The cast is outstanding in conveying the camaraderie between all the mums"

Amy Ross is equally impressive as the relentlessly chipper Sophie, and her solo ballad is the most affecting moment of the show as she reveals a difficult secret. Rebecca Bernice Amissah gives a thoughtful performance as Michelle, a Black mother unsure how to explain a racist world to her twin sons.

It's the character of Esme, brilliantly played by Belinda Wollaston, who most closely emulates Beecher's journey, as she faces horrifying auditory and visual hallucinations. The audience is transported into her experience of postnatal psychosis as phantom baby cries echo around the auditorium, and momentary uses of blue strip lighting give an eerie appearance to the normally warmly lit set. Wollaston's confusion, desperation and pain are almost tangible when she sings; at times it sounds like the vocals are being ripped from her throat.

Despite many powerful moments, there are times when the show still feels like a work in progress, with certain plot threads created and then abandoned. And while Verity Quade's music is mostly effective, some of the ballads need a stronger melody to avoid blending together. With a little more development, though, this show could have a big impact on the theatre landscape. It's a vital reflection of experiences that millions of women go through, with an essential message of self-acceptance which counteracts society's narrative that mothers should be perfect.

It's also a production that is paving the way for a model that supports parents working in theatre, with child-friendly rehearsals and creative, production and management teams that all feature mums.

There are baby-friendly matinees, too, increasing audience accessibility. This isn't just a show for parents though; everyone can enjoy its humour, honesty and hope.

Laura Lott

Production credits

Cast Rebecca Bernice Amissah, Joanna Kirkland, Amy Ross, Jade Samuels, Belinda Wollaston
Direction Sarah Meadows, Michelle Payne
Musical direction Debbi Clarke
Music supervision, arrangements Verity Quade
Choreography Natasha Harrison
Set, costumes Libby Todd
Lighting Aaron J Dootson
Sound Andrew Johnson

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

Jesus Christ Superstar

Andrew Lloyd Webber music **Tim Rice** lyrics
Manchester Palace Theatre 11-23 September 2023, then touring until 17 Aug 2024
REVIEWED ON 13 SEPTEMBER 2023

Shem Omari James takes centre stage as Judas; Julian Clary makes an entrance in the role of Herod; an exceptional Ian McIntosh, as Jesus, with the ensemble

Jesus Christ Superstar has always been divisive. It's an outrageous concept: a very '70s rock opera about the last days of Christ, swinging wildly from melodrama to comedy. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice are, of course, masters at moving between tones and genres but this show in particular whips us rapidly between histrionic despair, cheesy pop songs, camp comedy and moving ballads in a way that isn't always translated effectively.

I find this show most effective when it leans into its sense of camp and embraces excess. However, some past productions have taken themselves a bit too seriously. So how does this newer version fare?

There's definitely a sense of spectacle in Timothy Sheader's production, first performed at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre in 2016: the industrial set is striking, with a huge cross splitting the stage in two and serving as a platform for some of the biggest numbers. Technically, this show has some excellent creative touches, such as Judas's hands turning silver with his betrayal. A re-creation of Leonardo da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper* is a beautiful piece of choreography, with the ensemble statue-still. The cast members are involved in the instrumentation, taking up guitars and percussion.

There are some showstopping takes on favourite songs. Ian McIntosh as Jesus gives an exceptional performance, especially during 'Gethsemane' where his mixture of petulant anger and unbearable despair come through clearly. Hannah Richardson as Mary Magdalene has a lovely voice and assured stage presence, while Shem Omari James brings a frenetic energy to Judas as his emotional state becomes ever more fractured. As the High Priests Caiaphas and Annas, Jad Habchi and Matt Bateman are delightfully pompous while Ryan O'Donnell's Pilate plays the charisma and cowardice well. The excellent supporting cast is rarely offstage.

However, this is definitely a show of two halves. Part of the challenge is the storytelling, and some of this is more of an issue with the source material than this production. UK audiences in the '70s were more likely to have had cultural knowledge of the gospels and characters. There isn't really any orientation into Jesus's world in the first act for people whose prior knowledge of the story might be more rudimentary. We don't get much insight into who the different characters are or what they want. We move between songs with little sense of a strong narrative arc threading it together. In contrast, the second act has a much more straightforward (and familiar) story as we see the unfolding of Judas's betrayal, Jesus's growing agony and the deaths of both.

> "Clary's arrival marks a turning point: after this, there's a freer energy to routines"

We first meet Jesus with acoustic guitar strapped to his back and a bunch of followers in youthful casual clothing, a bit earnest and try-hard like a particularly committed Christian youth pastor. Unfortunately, it's hard to tell if this is a deliberate reference or not.

There are some big tunes in the first act, performed well, but there isn't always enough of a sense of what's at stake and it all feels a bit buttoned-up. For example, the High Priests are funny, precisely because they are so excessive, but there's a feeling of 'Are we allowed to laugh at this?' This alters in Act Two, especially when big-name star Julian Clary's Herod turns up.

Clary's arrival marks a turning point: after this, the show really lets loose. There's a much freer energy to the routines, and characters make more direct contact with the audience. This superior second act feels incredibly assured, with the tonal shifts from high-camp comedy to deep despair satisfyingly hitting their mark.

I'm not sure if this show is going to entirely win over new converts, but ardent fans were left in raptures by the end.

When this production makes its excesses a virtue and lets the audience in, not only does the humour land more successfully, so does the pathos. *Jesus Christ Superstar is* a ridiculous musical. When it embraces that, and takes us into its heart, we finally get a sense of why it's endured as long as it has.

Ruth Deller

Production credits

Cast Ian McIntosh, Shem Omari James, Julian Clary, Hannah Richardson, Ryan O'Donnell, Jad Habchi, Matt Bateman *et al*
Direction Timothy Sheader
Musical direction Michael Riley
Musical supervision Tom Deering
Choreography Drew McOnie
Set, costumes Tom Scutt
Lighting Lee Curran
Sound Nick Lidster

PHOTOGRAPHY: Paul Coltas

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Pretty Woman: The Musical

Bryan Adams, Jim Vallance music, lyrics
Garry Marshall, JF Lawton book
The Alexandra, Birmingham 17-28 October 2023, then touring
REVIEWED ON 24 OCTOBER 2024

Ore Oduba as Happy Man with Natalie Paris as Kit; Amber Davies (also far right) and Oliver Savile join the company to live out the fairy tale as Vivian and Edward

There's no getting away from the tawdriness of *Pretty Woman*'s central concept. Edward, a rich businessman, hires Vivian, a sex worker, to be his companion during a week's stay in Los Angeles. Edward gives Vivian a *Pygmalion*-style transformation, and the pair fall in love. On paper it shouldn't be appealing, but the 1990 movie became one of the most successful romantic comedies ever and catapulted Julia Roberts into superstardom. Surely though, a modern stage adaptation would update the story for today's audiences? Well, no, not really.

Pretty Woman: The Musical is almost a carbon copy of the film, something that contributed to the decidedly mixed reviews it received for its Broadway bow in 2018 and its West End transfer in 2020. With a book by Garry Marshall and JF Lawton, who served as director and writer respectively on the movie, the show hits all the same plot beats. It makes no real attempt to modernise the gender politics; the most we get is a slightly altered scene where Vivian fights off the unwanted attentions of Edward's business partner rather than being saved by Edward.

Jerry Mitchell directs, but while other adaptations he's helmed, such as *Legally Blonde*, have given us deeper character insights, there's little of that here.

Despite lyrical refrains about following your dreams, we don't get much sense of Vivian dreaming of anything beyond getting off the streets and marrying a white knight.

While remaining so faithful to the movie has its drawbacks, the flip side is that the musical contains everything that audiences looking for nostalgia could possibly want. All the beloved scenes, from the famous shopping sequence to the racetrack excursion, are included, and even the outfits are replicated exactly.

It's a slick, crowd-pleasing production. David Rockwell's minimal but effective sets take us from the neon lights and silhouetted palm trees of Hollywood Boulevard to the luxe Beverly Wilshire penthouse suite, and a towering opera box provides the ideal platform for Vivian to experience *La traviata*. Tom Rogers's costumes transport us to the late 1980s with leather miniskirts, thigh-high boots and an abundance of acid-wash denim.

> "As Vivian, Amber Davies gives us a sweet, tough character who is easy to root for"

The score from Canadian songwriting partnership Bryan Adams and Jim Vallance is guitar- and piano-led soft rock, with several upbeat, feel-good numbers and a few power ballads that could have come from one of Adams's '90s albums. The tracks are enjoyable, if not particularly memorable. Lyrics are often painfully on the nose, particularly in Vivian's two biggest songs, 'Anywhere But Here' and 'I Can't Go Back', but the soaring notes impress regardless.

Amber Davies tackles those notes with impressive grit and power. She's charming as Vivian, and resists the urge to emulate Roberts too closely, instead giving us a sweet, tough character who is easy to root for.

She's well matched with Oliver Savile, who's suave but likeable and performs his several ballads with a silky tone befitting of the always-smooth Edward.

Natalie Paris is delightful in the role of Vivian's friend Kit, all bubbling exuberance and extended riffs. The show is stolen, though, by Ore Oduba who appears as several characters, most notably hotel manager Mr Thompson. Frequently breaking the fourth wall, he gets constant laughs, and provides a necessary dose of warmth. His vocals aren't particularly strong, but he makes up for it with dazzling dancing and equally dazzling grins.

Mr Thompson may or may not be dating Noah Harrison's bellboy Giulio, who does some scene stealing of his own with a series of gleefully shocked expressions.

Pretty Woman: The Musical has its flaws, with its lack of modern sensibility, absence of nuance and several forgettable songs. But as an exercise in faithfully translating a beloved film onto the stage and providing a dose of escapism and wish fulfilment (who wouldn't want an unlimited shopping spree in Beverly Hills?), it succeeds. It may not be a great musical, but for many people it will be a great night out.

Laura Lott

Production credits

Cast Amber Davies, Oliver Savile, Ore Oduba, Natalie Paris, Ben Darcy, Chomba Taulo, Noah Harrison *et al*
Direction, choreography Jerry Mitchell
UK associate direction Dominic Shaw
UK musical supervision Gareth Weedon
Set David Rockwell
Lighting Kenneth Posner, Philip S Rosenberg
UK sound design Greg Pink
Costumes Tom Rogers

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner

Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends

Stephen Sondheim music, lyrics
Cameron Mackintosh deviser
Gielgud Theatre 21 Sep 2023 – 6 Jan 2024
REVIEWED ON 3 OCTOBER 2023

Gavin Lee (left) with his two fellow 'Man Maids'; Lea Salonga and Jeremy Secomb cook up the worst pies in London; the company with Bernadette Peters (centre)

Not a day goes by that Stephen Sondheim doesn't seem somewhere a part of my life, and I'm sure countless others would say the same. His ongoing presence some two years after his death late in 2021, aged 91, seems doubly evident in the theatre world just now, with a veritable explosion of Sondheim this season in New York and, closer to home, a proper West End run for last year's gala revue *Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends*.

This London celebration is the brainchild of Cameron Mackintosh, a genuine old friend of the legendary composer-lyricist who has produced several Sondheim-themed revues over the years: those include *Side by Side by Sondheim*, where I first made Sondheim's acquaintance as a teenager during the show's feted Broadway transfer, and *Putting It Together*, which had separate runs Off Broadway and on.

I attended the one-off gala of *Old Friends* in May 2022, which boasted the sort of cast (Judi Dench, for one) whom you couldn't imagine committing to a run eight times a week. So the astonishing thing about this current iteration – next door, as it happens, to the Mackintosh-owned Sondheim Theatre – is that so much time-honoured material should feel so remarkably fresh.

For that, credit a dazzling array of talent who understand this work to their bones, alongside two genius directors in Matthew Bourne, working 'side by side' with Julia McKenzie. Bourne, an avowed newcomer to directing Sondheim, has provided a gloss and sheen that allow the show to connect with those ordinary mortals who may not be able to quote every lyric. McKenzie, by contrast, was in her day the supreme Sondheim interpreter of *Follies*, *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods* – and was incandescent in all three.

Her presence on this occasion surely helped the cast craft the narrative arcs of more than 40 songs. It's not enough merely to hit the notes, and Sondheim always spoke very sensibly of preferring actors who sing to the other way round. What counts is an ensemble who can communicate the often troubling or bittersweet or sometimes flat-out hilarious mood (and key) changes on display: this company does McKenzie's stewardship of Sondheim proud.

> "The company are visibly energised by a Merrily entr'acte that raises the roof"

First among equals is surely Bernadette Peters, an ageless 75 whom I've seen across a handful of Sondheim shows in New York but who, until now, has never had a proper West End run. Woven into the proceedings more fully than she was last May, Peters shares with the late Barbara Cook an aching *tristesse* that reinvents both 'Send in the Clowns' and 'Losing My Mind'. (She's also hilarious opposite the invaluable Bradley Jaden in the *Into the Woods* sequence, here playing a role denied her when she originated the Witch on Broadway in 1987.)

Lea Salonga has done her Sondheim away from Broadway or the West End, but her clarion pipes turn out to be perfect for both Mrs Lovett and Madame Rose, and there's a neatness to Salonga returning to the West End under the auspices of Mackintosh who launched her career in 1989 with *Miss Saigon*.

One can't do justice to all the talent on view. It's nonetheless worth singling out Gavin Lee, whose brilliant 'Could I Leave You?', from *Follies*, is its own one-act play, and Clare Burt (who replaced the late Haydn Gwynne), whose 'The Ladies who Lunch' is ripped from the gut, the performer doubling over as if in pained recognition of the song's pulse-racing realisation that 'everybody dies'.

Jac Yarrow, Janie Dee, Joanna Riding and the ceaselessly game Bonnie Langford are just a few of the others visibly energised by Alfonso Casado Trigo's conducting and the lustrous sound of an orchestra that all but raises the roof with the *Merrily We Roll Along* entr'acte. Sondheim himself, of course, gets the last word. And that seems entirely right and just, his bequest guaranteed to live among and within us day after day after day till the days go by.

Matt Wolf

Production credits

Cast Bernadette Peters, Lea Salonga, Clare Burt, Janie Dee, Bradley Jaden, Bonnie Langford, Gavin Lee, Joanna Riding, Jac Yarrow *et al*
Direction, staging Matthew Bourne, Julia McKenzie
Musical supervision Stephen Brooker
Musical arrangements Stephen Metcalfe
Conductor Alfonso Casado Trigo
Choreography Stephen Mear
Set Matt Kinley
Lighting Warren Letton
Sound Mick Potter
Costumes Jill Parker
Projections George Reeve

PHOTOGRAPHY: Danny Kaan

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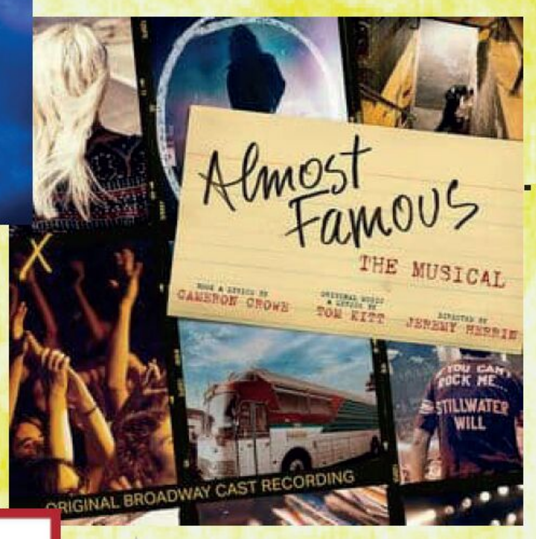

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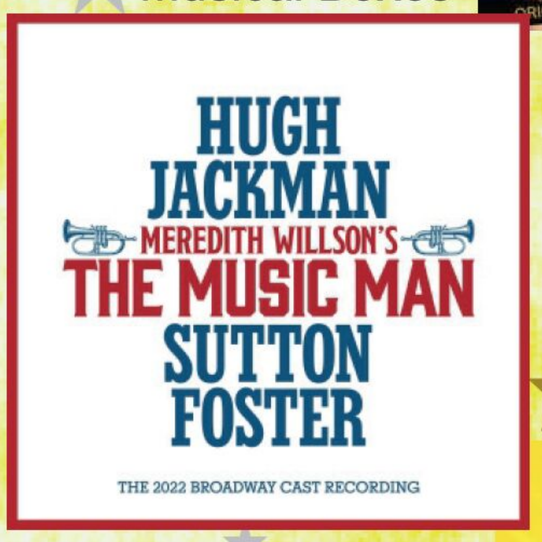

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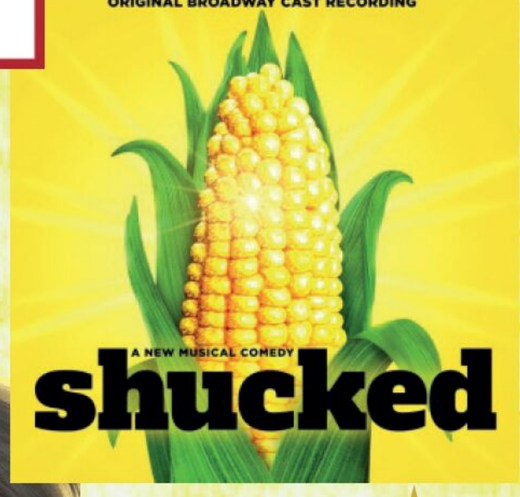

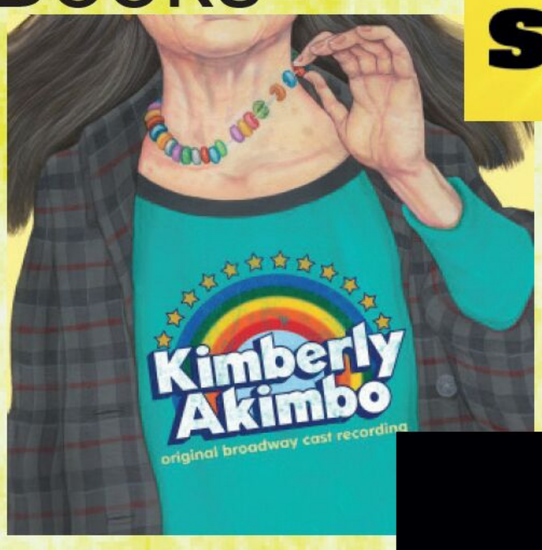

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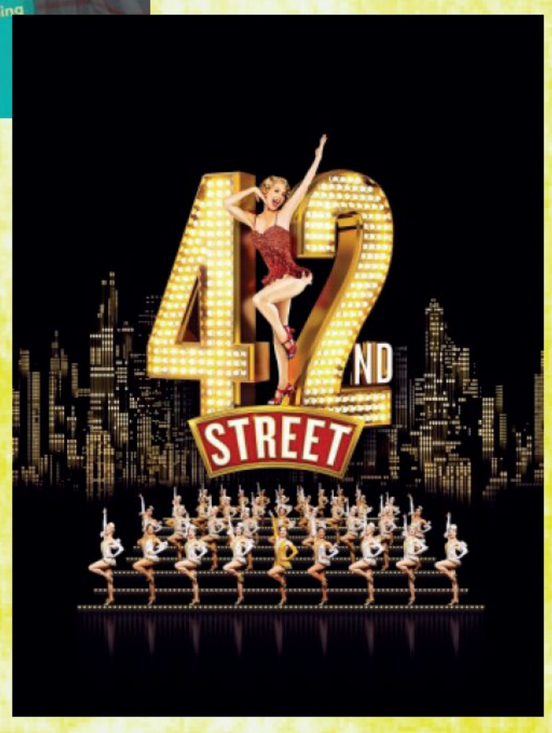


Sunset Boulevard

Andrew Lloyd Webber music **Don Black, Christopher Hampton** lyrics, book
Savoy Theatre 21 September 2023 – 6 January 2024
REVIEWED ON 10 OCTOBER AND 6 NOVEMBER 2023

The survivor of a brutal system: Nicole Scherzinger's Norma gets physical with Tom Francis as Joe; but he is also distracted by Grace Hodgett Young as Betty

The greatest star of all? Better make that two. Jamie Lloyd's electrifying, stripped-back reinvention of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Don Black and Christopher Hampton's 1993 musical boasts a remarkable pair of Norma Desmonds in Nicole Scherzinger and Rachel Tucker, who are sharing this triumphant West End run.

Scherzinger was the more controversial announcement. Many of us wondered how the former member of raunchy band The Pussycat Dolls-turned-reality TV stalwart could possibly follow in the hallowed footsteps of Patti LuPone and Glenn Close. And surely the glamorous 45-year-old Scherzinger was far too young for the role?

Ah, but that turns out to be a very deliberate, and effective, choice on Lloyd's part. Of course it's absurd that Scherzinger's beautiful, lithe, silk-negligée-clad Norma – who can twerk and pop into the splits – is deemed a relic, but that casts the judgement on to an industry that is just as ridiculously youth-obsessed today as it was in 1949. Lloyd uses Scherzinger's public persona, and our preconceptions, to create another metatheatrical layer for this already knowing show. Isn't Scherzinger a kind of modern Norma Desmond, a star unfairly put out to pasture? And aren't we partly here to gawp at this…well, as per the diva herself, let's not call it a 'comeback', but a 'return'?

When Norma, a silent movie actress who fell out of fashion with the arrival of the talkies, discusses her own grand return – a film in which she would star as Salome – with her reluctant collaborator, the penniless writer Joe Gillis, he suggests a script tweak: they could occasionally cut away from her. 'Why?' quips Scherzinger, arching an eyebrow at the audience. 'What else would they have come here for?' It brings the house down.

Scherzinger belts out Norma's big numbers as though she's trying to wow Simon Cowell on *The X Factor*. She doesn't have vocal control (it's either high and soft, or low and blasted into the mic), but she has a lifetime's worth of experience and a point to prove. It's a very pertinent rage, not a gently fossilised lament.

> "Scherzinger's is a vanity-free performance. She lurches into the camera, eyes wild…"

That's one of numerous clever ways in which Lloyd blows the cobwebs off this show. His slick, monochromatic staging is noir with a racing pulse. There are no cumbersome props or scenery in Soutra Gilmour's striking design; instead, Norma's mansion exists in a smoky, liminal space, a theatre in the mind. This is *Sunset Boulevard* as psychological thriller.

Lloyd uses handheld cameras as an intrinsic part of his storytelling. Via Nathan Amzi and Joe Ransom's mesmerising video and projections, he builds up a complex picture of how Norma's self-image was nurtured by the focus of a lens and the glow of a spotlight, and how, without them, she lost her identity. Is it any wonder that she's now mentally unstable?

Act Two opens with a bravura filmed set-piece, in which Tom Francis's Joe, while performing the title number, leads us backstage (where we see a cardboard-cutout Lloyd Webber and a Pussycat Dolls poster) and out into the street. It feeds into the show's essential question of whether we want art to reflect fantasy or reality.

Lloyd also shows us a ruthless Hollywood, emphasising the biting satire of Black and Hampton's lyrics and book. In 'Let's Have Lunch', a nightmarish chorus line faces out front, not looking at one another as they trade hollow promises and horror stories (some of the #MeToo variety). They mindlessly circle the despairing, unemployed Joe as he cries out, unheeded, or shove each other out of the way.

Throughout, the brilliant choreographer Fabian Aloise communicates tone and character, aided by the indispensable ensemble who are casually dressed in hoodies, knee socks and combat trousers. Their pathological narcissism is conveyed through tough, brusque, stylised contemporary movement (Pina Bausch-meets-Nike ad), whereas in Norma's eerie household, where time has stopped, everyone wanders dreamily as if wading through treacle.

The emphasis on physicality plays to Scherzinger's strengths. She gives this former silent movie actress wild gestures and exaggerated movement, and she keeps pace with the athletic company in the frenzied latter stages. But she's also haunted and taunted by a younger Norma: the well-cast lookalike, and exquisite dancer, Hannah Yun Chamberlain.

Scherzinger's is a vanity-free performance. She lurches into the camera, eyes wild, as she proclaims that she can convey anything with her face. But even at the bloody climax, she maintains a measure of sympathy: still the victim, or survivor, of a brutal system.

With the show so purposefully built around Scherzinger, I was fascinated to see how it might operate with another, very different, performer. To find out, I returned on a 'Tucker Monday'; *Sunset*'s other big-name lead is only performing once a week.

The change of cast certainly didn't affect audience numbers or response. The Savoy

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner

Tom Francis's image towers over the indispensible Sunset ensemble; the dramatic journey of Rachel Tucker's Norma Desmond is akin to a 'religious experience'

Theatre was packed out – cheeringly, with plenty of younger theatregoers in attendance too, and a more diverse crowd than you might usually expect for this particular musical – and they went just as crazy for it, if not more so, than on press night.

As for the show, very little was altered for Tucker's night (understandably for a production of this technical complexity) other than a *Wicked* poster appearing in the backstage tour. One thing that puzzled me was why Chamberlain still played the young Norma when it would have been more effective to have an actress closely resembling Tucker. As superb as Chamberlain is, she calls attention to Scherzinger's absence.

Otherwise, the cast change proves the rock-solid foundations of Lloyd's revival, which, when it surely transfers to Broadway, could play this same postmodern trick with another Scherzinger-type public figure, or could continue on with a Musical Theatre actress of Tucker's calibre.

Although we lose that frisson of 'Can she hack it?' with Tucker (we know she can!), she too is a battle-scarred performer who fought her way through a Lloyd Webber reality show back in the day: 2008's *I'd Do Anything*. Conversely, she's in no danger of losing her star status – this, among several recent roles, proves that she's only getting better with age and made me long for her Momma Rose.

Her Norma doesn't break the fourth wall as much (other than one winking line about how she would never share credit), but is instead a mind-blowing dramatic creation. How on earth she has been able to find this level of mastery over the character with such a limited number of performances, and presumably less rehearsal time, I really cannot fathom.

Or perhaps that explains the go-for-broke intensity. Right from her first appearance, Tucker has a magnetic force. She's initially icy and imperious, but she tears into 'With One Look', building it expertly so that Norma's firepower – the point at which the unyielding fighter emerges – perfectly matches the musical crescendo. It's so earth-shattering that her following line of dialogue (a dismissive 'Now go') earns a disbelieving laugh.

> "How has Tucker been able to find this level of mastery with so few performances?"

Likewise, she gets mid-song applause in 'As If We Never Said Goodbye', but then beautifully lowers the temperature to convey Norma's vulnerability and awe as she revels in her Paramount studio homecoming. It's almost a religious experience.

Tucker has a different type of physicality to Scherzinger, but it's no less involving. She goes from purposefully stalking Joe like a sensual panther to trading off silly dance moves with him on New Year's Eve, shedding her defences; he has brought back her sense of joy.

Yet there's always that ferocious need, too, a bottomless hunger that no one can sate. After Norma's suicide attempt, Tucker strips all emotion out of her voice when she utters those terrible, certain words: 'I'll do it again.' Her final breakdown is gut-wrenching.

Given how intimately the scenes between Norma, Joe and her loyal butler Max are staged, it's remarkable that they work just as flawlessly with Tucker. I felt Francis had buried even deeper inside Joe on my second viewing, really putting the 'dead' into deadpan humour and slouching hopelessly in his chair. That is, until he's wrenched back to life by Grace Hodgett Young's tenacious, gloriously clarion-voiced script editor Betty.

David Thaxton is a memorable Max, looming up suddenly on the big screen, or, low-lit by Jack Knowles (whose design throughout is phenomenal), casting a great shadow as he sings of how Norma's fans would 'sacrifice themselves to touch her shadow' in a spine-tingling 'The Greatest Star of All'.

Lloyd Webber's score has never sounded better. He and David Cullen, in these new orchestrations, bring sincerity to its operatic-leaning torch songs and a restless energy to its jazzy themes. It now speaks directly to a generation who, like Norma, often define themselves via cameras and images. Here you'll find the magic of make-believe wrapped up in a brutal cautionary tale – one told by two indomitable actresses.

Marianka Swain

Production credits

Cast Nicole Scherzinger/Rachel Tucker, Tom Francis, Grace Hodgett Young, David Thaxton, Hannah Yun Chamberlain *et al*
Direction Jamie Lloyd
Musical direction Alan Williams
Orchestrations Andrew Lloyd Webber, David Cullen
Choreography Fabian Aloise
Set, costumes Soutra Gilmour
Lighting Jack Knowles
Sound Adam Fisher
Video, cinematography Nathan Amzi, Joe Ransom

The Time Traveller's Wife

Joss Stone, Dave Stewart music, lyrics **Nick Finlow** additional music
Kait Kerrigan additional lyrics **Lauren Gunderson** book
Apollo Theatre, London 7 October 2023 – 30 March 2024
REVIEWED ON 2 NOVEMBER 2023

Digital sparks: Joanna Woodward (centre) as Clare, who anchors the narrative; Henry (David Hunter) and Clare celebrate their wedding; doomed time traveller Henry

Audrey Niffenegger's 2003 debut novel *The Time Traveler's Wife* took the science fiction premise of a man who randomly and involuntarily jumps through time and paired it with a romance with the woman whose life he always seemed to jump into. Writers often play with time to offer us slices of a relationship out of chronological order, but usually the lovers are at least in step with each other. For Henry and Clare, that is a luxury denied to them.

The novel's themes of predestination and the quest for a soulmate are not uncommon in Musical Theatre. And so the novel finds itself, after film and TV adaptations, hitting the stage with a book by Lauren Gunderson and songs by Joss Stone and Dave Stewart. In the process, it gains a British spelling to become *The Time Traveller's Wife*, but the American setting and accents remain.

Joanna Woodward's portrayal of Clare anchors the narrative, yet David Hunter's Henry is equally central. Hunter brings a relatable warmth to Henry, essential for countering any ickiness when the character finds himself interacting with a 10-year-old Clare. Given that these interactions are what cause Clare to fall in love with Henry, they need a delicate portrayal to avoid impressions of grooming; Gunderson's writing and Hunter's gentle charisma do their best to provide that.

Musically, Stewart and Stone's numbers are quality pop songs and never feel inappropriate to the book, but nor do they feel as tightly integrated as they could be. It seems that the songwriting pair is most comfortable when writing adjacent to the narrative rather than within it. This is most notable in 'Journeyman', Hunter's first solo in Act Two. Front and rear projections are used to convey the sense of travelling in time from Henry's point of view; black-clad dancers helping Hunter fly through the air as projected duplicates do the same.

Despite it feeling out of kilter with the rest of the show, it's an impressive presentation that highlights the show's technical skill. Projections and digital backdrops are used heavily throughout, cleverly transforming Anna Fleischle's ever-revolving plain, brutalist slabs with textures and colours to portray a multitude of settings. They also allow Henry's arrivals and departures to be accompanied by intense bursts of white-hot energy. Henry's disappearances are often occasioned by Hunter running offstage, leaving a flurry of digital sparks in his wake; but more than once, he disappears or reappears on stage. Chris Fisher's illusions ensure a genuine sense of wonder at how that could have been accomplished.

> "Any sense of romance is down to the chemistry between Hunter and Woodward"

Woodward matches Hunter for charm, despite a role which is largely reactive. The most fun she – or any of us – has is with her old schoolmates Charisse and Gomez, played with bucketloads of appeal by Hiba Elchikhe and Tim Mahendran. They inject necessary humour into the potentially overly sweet narrative. But by the nature of the premise, the story is inevitably fragmentary in places. Only in the second act, when we get longer of periods of time with the couple in the same time zone, do we finally get some meaty looks at the pair's relationship. But with that comes a loss of the pizzazz that defined Act One.

The original novel allowed us much more into both characters' shoes, imagining their situation and heightening proceedings accordingly. There is less space for us to do that here, denying the musical any opportunity to feel as profound or as deep as it believes itself to be. Any sense of romance in its story comes down to the chemistry between Hunter and Woodward.

But anyone with even the slightest romantic heart will find themselves leaving the theatre wanting to be with their loved ones – for like Clare, none of us know how much time we have left with them.

Scott Matthewman

Production credits

Cast David Hunter, Joanna Woodward, Tim Mahendran, Hiba Elchikhe, Ross Dawes, Sorelle Marsh, Alwyne Taylor, Irfan Damani *et al*
Direction Bill Buckhurst
Musical direction Katherine Woolley
Musical supervision Nick Finlow
Orchestrations Malcolm Edmonstone
Choreography Shelley Maxwell
Set Anna Fleischle
Lighting Rory Beaton, Lucy Carter
Sound Richard Brooker
Video Andrzej Goulding
Illusions Chris Fisher

PHOTOGRAPHY: Johan Persson

To Wong Foo: The Musical

Lewis Flinn music, lyrics **Douglas Carter Beane** book
Hope Mill Theatre, Manchester 21 October – 17 December 2023
REVIEWED ON 26 OCTOBER 2023

Pablo Gómez Jones as Chi Chi, Peter Caulfield as Vida and Gregory Haney as Noxeema; Vida helps Carol Ann (Carolyn Maitland); the threesome takes to the road

Turning films into musicals remains a (divisive) trend. To stand out in a crowded market, a musical has to make sense in its own right rather than feeling like a cynical facsimile of the original. The best loved (*Hairspray*, *Waitress*, *Heathers*) balance reverence for the source material with unique innovations, but this isn't always easy to achieve.

To Wong Foo: The Musical, based on *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995) has a couple of aces up its sleeve. Firstly, it's debuting in a smaller independent theatre with a strong connection to the LGBTQ+ community (important in a show about drag queens). And, secondly, the writer and director is Douglas Carter Beane, the film's writer. Fans of the original can rest assured that beloved characters Vida Boheme (Peter Caulfield), Noxeema Jackson (Gregory Haney) and Chi Chi Rodriguez (Pablo Gómez Jones) are in safe hands.

The story is straightforward: established drag queens Vida and Noxeema take newcomer Chi Chi on a road trip across the USA. Their car breaks down in the small town of Snydersville where they wait until it can be repaired. Their arrival shakes up the town and residents' initial prejudices and resistance give way to community and celebration. It's a predictable, feel-good plot, although it tackles heavy themes, including domestic violence, homophobia, misogyny and racism.

Any doubts about whether a musical version of the story is needed are dispelled as soon as opening number 'Feel the Light' kicks in. It's a fierce celebration of queer life and establishes the overall vibe of the show: we're going to have a fabulous time.

Caulfield lends real depth to Vida, the queen who's seen it all; Gómez Jones, like Chi Chi, is a relative newcomer with bags of charisma and potential, and Haney is fabulous and funny as resilient Noxeema. Carolyn Maitland plays Carol Ann (who Vida befriends and helps escape from an abusive marriage) with sensitivity and heart, and the supporting cast is uniformly great.

> "The songs are catchy, often hilarious, and hit a range of emotional beats"

Most lines and scenes are recreated from the film (with some omissions due to rights issues), but there are some unique flourishes and additional characters that add fun and texture to proceedings. The songs are catchy, often hilarious, and hit a range of emotional beats.

Production credits

Cast Peter Caulfield, Gregory Haney, Pablo Gómez Jones, Carolyn Maitland, Duncan Burt, Ayesha Maynard, Scott Hunter *et al*
Direction Douglas Carter Beane
Musical supervision Brad Simmons
Choreography, associate direction Jane McMurtrie
Set Katie Lias
Lighting Jack Weir
Sound Sam Glossop
Costumes, wigs Gregory Gale, Bobbie Zlotnik
Video Dan Light

While I could see this show working equally well as a big-budget production on a large stage, there's something special about the more intimate environs of the Hope Mill. Sets transform through simple projections and changes of furniture, and, in lieu of a giant car taking central stage, a small moving rostrum is accompanied by four singing and dancing wheels. The closeness of the audience to the performers really builds a connection to the characters.

It's not a perfect musical – there were a couple of wardrobe malfunctions (which were handled well by the cast and kind of added to the lo-fi charm) and its predictability, both in story and score, might make some want more innovation.

However, revisiting its simple message of love, community and living your authentic life is highly poignant at this time. On the one hand, in an era where drag queens are now global superstars, there's a nostalgic joy in revisiting this story and celebrating its role in the history of LGBTQ+ representation. On the other, as the queer community – particularly drag queens, trans people and other gender non-conforming folk – presently face abuse and prejudice, there's something soothing and cathartic about a show that not only embraces but celebrates them in a venue that is a safe and welcoming space.

This production is the show's global premiere. Like its characters, it deserves to travel and bring its infectious joy to audiences everywhere.

Ruth Deller

PHOTOGRAPHY: Pamela Raith

Beverley Knight: 50

London Palladium 14 November 2023
REVIEWED ON 14 NOVEMBER 2023

Playful energy positively fizzing: vocally effortless Beverley Knight delivers a show of pure entertainment, reminding us why she is the 'Queen of British Soul'

In July 2020, Beverley Knight made history when she performed at a pilot event at the London Palladium, held to see how venues could reopen safely after being closed in March of that year due to Covid.

For those of us who were there, it was surreal, with temperatures taken at the door, socially distanced seating and audiences wearing masks among the many safety measures. If the atmosphere back then was slightly dampened by the protocols in place during what had already been a traumatic and turbulent time for theatre, one thing that raised the spirits was Knight, whose energy and powerhouse vocals entertained audiences who had been itching for live entertainment's return for months.

Scroll forward three years – with thoughts of social distancing and masks a thing of the past – and Knight was back at the Palladium once more to close her concert tour *50*, in support of new album 'The Fifth Chapter'. Expectations were high, but she more than delivered.

Opening with the up-tempo 'Greatest Day' from her second album 'Prodigal Sista', Knight burst onto the stage in a catsuit encrusted with sequins and decorated with white feathers – backed by an impressive seven-piece band and three excellent vocalists, all dressed in white.

Knight took no prisoners, immediately requesting the audience get to their feet – and we happily obliged: when Knight asks you to do something, you don't say no. Her enthusiasm was infectious, as she jumped around the stage, clapping to the beat, and encouraging the crowd to join her.

'I'm 50, don't you know,' she reminded us, her youthful appearance and playful energy positively fizzing.

The setlist weaved in new material (at one point she did three numbers, one after another, from her latest album, harmonising perfectly with her backing singers on new song 'Systematic Overload') with some of Knight's signature songs, including 'Shoulda Woulda Coulda', which was an instant crowd-pleaser.

> "With never a note out of place, Knight is a performer at the top of her game"

Not that we needed to wait for Knight's classics in order to be pleased. The diva held the packed Palladium's attention for 90 minutes of pure entertainment, reminding us why she has been dubbed the 'Queen of British Soul'. Her vocals were crisp, clear and effortless, sliding up and down the scale with an ease few divas could manage. Highlights included 'Cold World' and 'Get Up!'

Knight isn't afraid of intimacy, either, sharing stories behind some of her songs – including 'Gold', from her album 'Who I Am' which, she explained, was written following a chat with a friend about being treated badly by others – a touching number about self-worth. This was followed by a moving rendition of 'Fallen Soldier', a song written to honour the legacy of Stephen Lawrence. She also sang this track in tribute to her former musical director, Paul Reid, affectionally known as 'Reidy', who died in 2020, on Christmas Day. Her emotion was palpable, genuine – never forced.

Over the past few years, Knight has become something of a darling of Musical Theatre – her effortless vocals working their magic in productions such as *The Bodyguard*, *Memphis*, *Sylvia* and *Sister Act*. Each time, she has elevated the shows, her pitch-perfect vocals taking the popular scores and making them soar. Despite Musical Theatre's prominence in her own career, however, it didn't feature in this gig. In fact, the only time she deviated from her own material was in a rousing tribute to Chaka Khan, with 'I'm Every Woman', followed by her 'ultimate hero' Prince's 'I Wanna Be Your Lover'.

The evening was then topped off with Knight's 'Everything's Gonna Be Alright', a song she described as a 'message of hope', as the audience were sent – elated and skipping – into the night.

With never a note out of place, Knight is a singer and performer at the top of her game. Whether in pantomime, solo gigs or musicals, one thing's for sure – we are so very lucky to have her.

Matthew Hemley

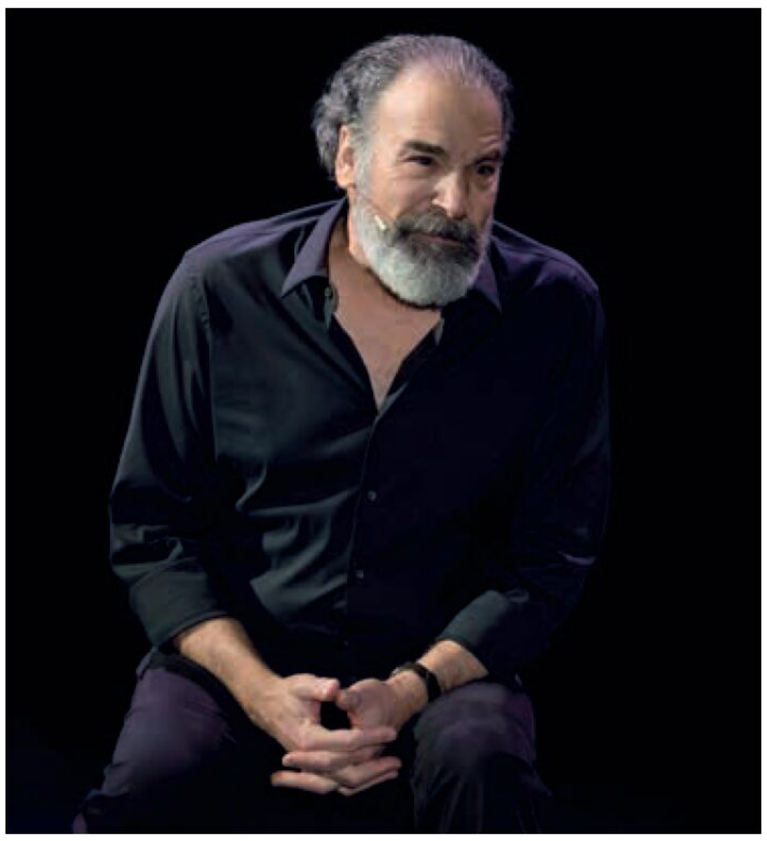
Production credits

Cast Beverley Knight
Musical direction Ashley Kingsley
Musicians Ashley Kingsley, David Troke, Carlos Hercules, Adam Goldsmith, Mark Walker, Bryan Chambers, Janet Ramus, Florence Rawlings, Jack Birchwood, Nik Carter
Choreography, creative direction Gareth Walker
Set Gareth Walker, Leigh Mulpeter
Lighting Leigh Mulpeter
Sound Aled Ifan, Robin Tombs

PHOTOGRAPHY: Eden Tam / Michelle Fredericks

Mandy Patinkin – Live in Concert

Lyric Theatre, London 7-19 November 2023
REVIEWED ON 9 NOVEMBER 2023



A privilege to see him perform: master musical storyteller Mandy Patinkin presents his one-man concert in the West End for the first time, and it's worth the wait

Stephen Sondheim is well represented on Shaftesbury Avenue at the moment. In very good company are the wonderful tribute revue *Old Friends*, right beside the theatre named for the composer, and the latest arrival, Mandy Patinkin's one-man show – brought to London for the first time.

It's also a reunion of sorts: he and Bernadette Peters, the original leads of *Sunday in the Park With George*, are essentially performing side by side. One might wish that Patinkin could sneak into Peters's production, or vice versa, except that Patinkin's concert is such a strange, but strangely perfect, theatrical curio that it could only exist as a solo outing.

Actually, that's not quite correct. Patinkin has the most remarkable assist from pianist Adam Ben-David, and their symbiotic creative partnership is extraordinary to see in action. Ben-David seems to know exactly what Patinkin wants or needs, even if the performer himself is in doubt. One of the charming features of this concert is Patinkin's frankness with his audience about his memory lapses, or how he can't read his setlist without his glasses.

The passing of time is a prevailing theme in a show suffused with wistful nostalgia. Patinkin includes some of the artists you'd expect – Sondheim, of course, plus Rodgers and Hammerstein, Jerry Herman, Irving Berlin – but many more that you wouldn't. However, his esoteric choices often strike the heart, like Randy Newman's 'Dayton, Ohio' or Stephin Merritt's 'I Wish I Had Pictures'.

That's balanced out by the 70-year-old Patinkin's astonishingly energetic clowning. He tears into zany patter songs, his speed of thought evidently keeping pace with the scurrying lyrics, or produces impressive Chaplin-esque mime.

Then there's 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. Patinkin does all of it, from soaring operatic notes to prog-rock fury, finishing with his arms raised aloft in triumph. It's a bonkers but brilliant showcase of his unique skillset: that resounding tenor, still pure and mighty as the clang of a bell, the intelligent interpretation of lyrics, and that facility for total zany silliness, albeit delivered with a straight face.

> "It's a bonkers but brilliant showcase of his skillset: that facility for total zany silliness"

A stripped-back staging – a grand piano, a light and a chair – ensures that all eyes are on Patinkin, and that he can set the pace. He needs frequent breathers to mop his face with a towel, but this is still a master at work. If anything, these moments of fragility add to the privilege of seeing him perform live.

While Musical Theatre isn't the sole focus here, the genre is still beautifully represented. A lovely anecdote about an encounter with Sondheim (and Angela Lansbury) at a party leads into a frank, gently sardonic rendition of 'Anyone Can Whistle', Patinkin soars in *Company*'s life-affirming 'Being Alive', and he gives us a jaw-dropping mini-drama via Billy's 'Soliloquy' from *Carousel*.

That examination of impending parenthood fits into Patinkin's general musing on family and loved ones – whether through heartbreakers like Marc Anthony Thompson's 'My Mom', about losing someone to dementia, or that longing for an estranged child in Newman's 'Wandering Boy'.

It crops up often in his rambling stories, too: his father taking him to New York to see his first Broadway show, or the birth of his own child here in a London hospital – the latter's arrival upstaged by some guy called Prince William.

Generally, the personal trumps the political, but there are some pointed music choices in the latter stages. Patinkin potently pairs 'You've Got to Be Carefully Taught' – the song from *South Pacific* which tackles inherited racism – with 'Children Will Listen' from *Into the Woods*. Both speak to our responsibility to hand down tolerance and understanding to our children, not hatred and fear.

Patinkin ends on an intensely moving note with a Yiddish version of 'Over the Rainbow'. The song, he reminds us, was written by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg, both children of immigrants who escaped the pogroms and found sanctuary in America. In these desperate times, it's an important lesson from history – one communicated powerfully through song by a singular, and unquestionably great, artist.

Marianka Swain

Production credits

Cast Mandy Patinkin, Adam Ben-David (piano)
Producers Staci Levine, Dodger Theatricals
Set Nathan Scheuer
Sound Daniel J Gerhard, Ellen Fitton
Production supervision Richard Hester
For UK concerts only:
Production management Stewart Crosbie
Sound Gareth Tucker
Stage management Emily Walters
General management Dodger Theatricals

PHOTOGRAPHY: Joan Marcus

The Great Gatsby

Jason Howland music **Nathan Tysen** lyrics **Kait Kerrigan** book
Paper Mill Playhouse, Millburn, New Jersey 12 October – 12 November 2023
REVIEWED ON 22 OCTOBER 2023

US LIVE SHOWS

Noah J Ricketts, John Zdrojeski, Eva Noblezada and Samantha Pauly raise a glass; Sara Chase as Myrtle (centre); Jeremy Jordan belts out his songs in the title role

What is it about Broadway creators and the Jazz Age? Two decades ago, composers Michael John LaChiusa and Andrew Lippa produced duelling musicals based on the same 1928 source, Joseph Moncure March's poem *The Wild Party*, which ran almost simultaneously on and Off Broadway (respectively). Neither generated much heat (though the LaChiusa version did nab seven Tony nominations).

Now another Jazz Age classic, F Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, has sparked a pair of musical adaptations vying for a Broadway berth. Next summer, Pulitzer Prize winner Martyna Majok will debut her adaptation – titled *Gatsby* – with a score by pop star Florence Welch and Oscar nominee Thomas Bartlett at Boston's American Repertory Theater. But first, New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse premieres a competing version from composer Jason Howland and lyricist Nathan Tysen, the songwriting team behind the recent Broadway flop *Paradise Square*.

Like that period piece, the score boasts fully orchestrated tunes that are polished, professional but mostly derivative and not particularly jazzy. (Still, there is some wit in lyrics that rhyme 'glasses' and 'molasses'.) It's also terrifically sung by a cast led by Jeremy Jordan as Gatsby (belting the last notes of his opening ballad in an almost direct callback to his 'Santa Fe' from *Newsies*); Eva Noblezada as Daisy Buchanan and Noah J Ricketts as the book's genial narrator Nick Carraway.

The ambitions are clear from the eye-popping set and cinematic projections (by Paul Tate dePoo III) featuring lush art deco nods to Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film. The concert-ready lighting by Cory Pattak and the over-the-top flapper-era costumes (by Linda Cho) sometimes scream Vegas more than period speakeasy. The show looks like a couple million bucks, with a fortune spent on two onstage automobiles alone, and some energetic group dance numbers (choreographed by Dominique Kelley) that have an appealing showmanship. Director Marc Bruni delivers the kind of high-gloss, new-money production that Gatsby might have built for himself on Long Island's North Shore.

> "From eye-popping sets to the cinematic projections, the show's ambitions are clear"

But there's a huge crack in the foundation – and it comes in Kait Kerrigan's book, which has turned Fitzgerald's classic into a mushy melodrama with characters twisted beyond all recognition. Gatsby, that most enigmatic of American antiheroes, here becomes a lovesick schoolboy who literally bumps into drinks carts trying to maintain his poise around his erstwhile crush, Daisy, who married the well-to-do Yalie Tom Buchanan (John Zdrojeski) after Gatsby shipped off to World War One. This Gatsby is such a simp that his attempts to seem cool, to brush off Tom as an 'old sport,' become the most obvious of poses. Worse, Kerrigan has shoehorned in a romantic B couple out of Fitzgerald's most notorious proto-queer characters, Nick and Jordan Baker (played by Samantha Pauly), a professional golfer and admitted 'confirmed bachelor' who mysteriously hooks up with the bookish naif Nick because, apparently, that's how musicals are meant to be structured. Paul Whitty and Sara Chase, meanwhile, make the most of their underwritten roles as George and Myrtle Wilson, the working-class couple undone by the shenanigans of the Buchanans and Gatsby.

What's so great about this Gatsby? He has no mystique, no sense of menace, so the reveal about his background is anticlimactic. Even his mobbed-up business partner, Meyer Wolfsheim (Stanley W Mathis), describes him as a dispensable pretty boy. Daisy doesn't fare any better, with the silky voiced Noblezada stuck with an 11 o'clock ballad describing herself as a 'beautiful little fool' (a line that Fitzgerald's character used ironically, not literally).

What we get is a Jazz Age-set romantic thriller that resembles the Fitzgerald book only if you squint really hard. Others will need the assistance of Doctor TJ Eckleburg, the eye doctor whose billboard looms over the Wilsons' gas station. At least the sign looks spectacular.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Jeremy Jordan, Eva Noblezada, Sara Chase, Stanley W Mathis, Samantha Pauly, Noah J Ricketts, Paul Whitty, John Zdrojeski *et al*
Direction Marc Bruni
Music direction Daniel Edmonds
Music supervision, orchestrations Jason Howland
Choreography Dominique Kelley
Set, projection design Paul Tate dePoo III
Lighting Cory Pattak
Sound Brian Ronan
Costumes Linda Cho
Hair, wigs Charles G LaPointe, Rachael Geier

PHOTOGRAPHY: Evan Zimmerman for Murphy Made

Gutenberg! The Musical!

Scott Brown, Anthony King music, lyrics, book
James Earl Jones Theatre, NYC 15 Sep 2023 – 28 Jan 2024
REVIEWED ON 6 OCTOBER 2023

The next Matthew Broderick and Nathan Lane? Andrew Rannells and Josh Gad become a lovable odd couple in a dizzyingly fast-paced bio-musical pastiche

Musical Theatre has long embraced the meta, and shows about making musicals or spoofing the genre have become a staple on Broadway, from *[title of show]* to *Something Rotten* to *A Strange Loop* to *Spamalot* (which has just spawned a major Broadway revival). The pleasure of these productions arises from embracing the elements of the format – *Spamalot* features a tune called 'The Song That Goes Like This' – while simultaneously holding them up for inspection (and ridicule).

The latest in the genre is *Gutenberg! The Musical!*, a jokey two-man showpiece which has debuted on Broadway more than 15 years after a mid-2000s run Off Broadway. The show has been structured as a semi-staged reading by two New Jersey funeral home employees and lifelong musical geeks who seek the backing of actual Broadway producers for their dream project, a heavily fictionalised bio-musical about printing-press inventor Johannes Gutenberg.

Why Gutenberg? Well, Bud and Doug reason that he produced the first book and 'If your new musical isn't already a movie or a book or a fairy tale told from the lady's point of view, people will not sell their cars to see it'. It also helps that Gutenberg's sparse Wikipedia entry gives the duo a ton of creative license to make up their own plot, which involves a cartoonishly evil monk and a love interest named Helvetica because, well, everybody has a type.

Scott Brown and Anthony King, who wrote the book and score and originally performed the show in the cramped basement theatre of the Upright Citizens Brigade back in the day, have jammed about as many punchlines into a two-hour show as humanly possible. Here, the material is immeasurably boosted by the savvy casting of the hopeful but hapless heroes: Josh Gad and Andrew Rannells.

The duo, who first broke out in 2011 as the Tony-nominated leads of *The Book of Mormon*, may not (yet) have the box office clout of Matthew Broderick and Nathan Lane, but just wait. They play off each other with a rapport that is deceptively casual while still lightning-quick. ('Interesting choice, Bud,' Rannells ad-libbed at my performance after Gad caught him off-guard with a bizarrely stressed delivery of the word *history*.)

> "Director Alex Timbers keeps Gad and Rannells at a sprinter's pace throughout"

The stars embrace their characters' deliberately amateurish qualities, crossing each other on stage with the exaggerated arm and leg movements of kindergarteners in a school pageant. Rannells is the taller, more conventionally handsome Abbott to Gad's shorter, schlubbier Costello. And while neither can be easily pegged as the straight man here, they complement each other in enthusiasm and naivety. Each deploys multiple accents to represent the ever-growing cast of *Gutenberg!*, which they further represent by donning baseball caps ID'd with the names of each character – setting up some hilariously whirlwind scenes of slamming-door farce that take place entirely on their foreheads.

They're a well-matched vocal team as well, Rannells's appealing baritone contrasting with Gad's ability to deploy a well-honed head voice and impressive riffs at the end of phrases. They each have highlights delivering a pastiche-heavy score that fits the material without elevating it very high. The best musical moments are meta, as when our heroes point out how elements of an Act Two song call back to an earlier tune ('A motif is when you use the same music over and over again – but it's not lazy,' Doug explains).

Director Alex Timbers keeps Gad and Rannells at a sprinter's pace throughout, with the laughs flying by at a dizzying clip.

He also holds a few surprises up his proverbial sleeve, including a second-act reveal on the deceptively simple set that helps justify ticket prices. (You may also see a star like Cynthia Erivo or Nathan Lane himself pop up for a walk-on bit as the sought-after Broadway producer.) Is there a more unlikely hit than *Gutenberg!*? You'd be hard-pressed to find one.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Josh Gad, Andrew Rannells
Direction Alex Timbers
Music direction Marco Paguia
Music supervision, orchestrations TO Sterrett
Movement Nancy Renee Braun
Set Scott Pask
Lighting Jeff Croiter
Sound ML Dogg, Cody Spencer
Costumes Emily Rebholz
Hair Tommy Kurzman

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy

Harmony

Barry Manilow music **Bruce Sussman** lyrics, book
Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York 18 October 2023 – ongoing
REVIEWED ON 9 NOVEMBER 2023

Poignant: Julie Benko and Sierra Boggess as Ruth and Mary; Broadway veteran Chip Zien's memory-sharing Rabbi; Allison Semmes's real-life singer Josephine Baker

Barry Manilow, who broke out in the 1970s with pop hits like 'Mandy' and 'Copacabana' that boasted both infectious melodies and strong narratives, seems to be tailor-made for Broadway. The 80-year-old star's first stage musical is not a jukebox mashup but an original composition that also unearths a deadly serious, largely forgotten true story: the Comedian Harmonists, a six-member, all-male German singing group which rose to international fame in the 1930s – until the Nazi regime could no longer tolerate their diverse musical tastes, irreverent performance style and, most importantly, three Jewish members.

It's a remarkable yarn, one that book writer and lyricist Bruce Sussman awkwardly presents as a memory play from the decades-later perspective of the last surviving member, a former Polish rabbinical student played by the indomitable Broadway veteran Chip Zien (the Baker in the original production of Sondheim and Lapine's *Into the Woods*). We get broad sketches of the six singers, as well as two of their romantic partners – Young Rabbi's level-headed shiksa future wife Mary (Sierra Boggess), and Ruth (Julie Benko), a placard-hoisting Jewish revolutionary type who falls for the group's pianist, an overly optimistic Christian dubbed 'Chopin' (played with soulful indecision by Blake Roman).

The first act crams in a lot of somewhat pedestrian exposition, leading up to a fateful concert at New York City's Carnegie Hall in 1933 where the group considers an offer to remain in the States for a lucrative gig from NBC. They decline, setting the stage for a much darker second act where both the music and the tone of the show reflect how Hitler's tightening grip on power impacts our heroes. While the first act featured a soufflé-light slapstick number called 'How Can I Serve You Madam?' involving crotch-covering silver trays, seltzer spray bottles and farce-worthy choreography, the second act's bitterly ironic 'Come to the Fatherland!' depicts the singers as literal puppets of the Nazi regime, with bright red bands of fabric from the ceiling restricting their every move. Recalling a certain NSYNC video, the Harmonists seem to be saying 'bye bye bye' to their hosts.

> "The score's highlights are the ballads, particularly an Act One declaration of love"

Director-choreographer Warren Carlyle succeeds in these ensemble numbers, using Beowulf Boritt's reflective black lacquer box of a set, Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer's concert-style lighting and the period costumes by Linda Cho and Ricky Lurie to great effect. But he's less secure as a director of the book scenes, where the seams in the narrative show most clearly. Sussman gives in to the temptation of heightened melodrama, elevating a scene in which the Harmonists encounter Hitler on a train into a woulda-coulda-shoulda moment of regret that feels wildly implausible. (Were these singers going to stab the Führer with a pitch pipe and end the war?) In the show's climactic musical moment, Zien delivers a powerful *cri de coeur* solo to rival 'Rose's Turn' about his supposed missed opportunity. It's simultaneously moving and unconvincing, weighed down by some of Sussman's clunkiest lyrics ('Why?! Why?! Adonai!').

You can see why this project has been in development for more than two decades – and why the creators have struggled to wrestle the many characters, the dramatic shifts in tone and the sheer weight of the history into a coherent production. The highlights of Manilow's score are the ballads, particularly an Act One declaration of love by Danny Kornfeld's Young Rabbi called 'Every Single Day' and a charming (and beautifully sung) duet by Boggess and Benko, 'Where You Go,' that seems to borrow its melodic line from a prelude by Chopin (the composer, not the character). And there's an added poignancy to a story about the very real dangers of antisemitism arriving at this particular moment. It's said that history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. And *Harmony* offers a timely opportunity to delve into those rhymes and embrace both their beauty and their horror.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Chip Zien, Sierra Boggess, Sean Bell, Julie Benko, Danny Kornfeld, Zal Owen, Eric Peters, Blake Roman, Steven Telsey, Allison Semmes, Andrew O'Shanick *et al*
Direction, choreography Warren Carlyle
Music direction John O'Neill
Music arrangements Barry Manilow, John O'Neill
Orchestrations Doug Walter
Set Beowulf Boritt
Lighting Jules Fisher, Peggy Eisenhauer
Sound Dan Moses Schreier
Costumes Linda Cho, Ricky Lurie
Hair, wigs Tom Watson

PHOTOGRAPHY: Julieta Cervantes / Adam Riemer

Here We Are

Stephen Sondheim music, lyrics **David Ives** book
The Shed, New York 28 September 2023 – 21 January 2024
REVIEWED ON 21 OCTOBER 2024

Here they are, world: Sondheim's surreal swan song boasts a cast including David Hyde Pierce's bishop (far left) and Rachel Bay Jones's Marianne (far right, in blue)

There has always been an undercurrent of social justice and class warfare in the work of the late, great Stephen Sondheim, from *Sweeney Todd* to the anarchic antiheroes of *Assassins*. But his final musical, *Here We Are*, is a more explicit social satire based on the brutal surrealist takedown of Spanish director Luis Buñuel's classic films *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and *The Exterminating Angel*.

A familiarity with the source material is helpful for theatregoers, as well as an appreciation for the irony of skewering the one per cent in a star-studded, lavishly produced show at the $500 million Off Broadway venue The Shed. Act One roughly follows the fortunes of six members of the urban elite, led by a business titan (Bobby Cannavale, wonderfully crass in a velour sweatsuit) and his status-conscious wife, Marianne (Rachel Bay Jones); a plastic surgeon (Jeremy Shamos) and his Hollywood agent wife (Amber Gray); the lascivious ambassador to the fictional Moranda (ultra-smooth Steven Pasquale); and Marianne's sister, a would-be revolutionary with a trust fund (the golden-voiced Micaela Diamond) whose progressive convictions evaporate the moment she meets a man with a real sense of purpose.

The discreetly charming six-pack's quest is a modern one: brunch. But they are repeatedly thwarted from that goal in a succession of locales (strikingly designed by David Zinn, who also performs wonders with the costumes). Who would say no to these oligarchs? The chameleonic Denis O'Hare and Tracie Bennett magnificently embody a series of varyingly apologetic servants and gatekeepers. 'We do expect a little latte later, but we haven't got a lot of latte now,' O'Hare sings to his disappointed patrons in a characteristically Sondheim turn of phrase.

It's a pleasure to hear the vamps, the syncopated rhythms of Sondheim's final new songs, with topical lyric shout-outs to 'infinity pools and Damien Hirsts' and the familiar juxtaposition of surface wit with the suggestion of deeper truths. The cast, which swells to include two military types (Francois Battiste and Jin Ha) as well as a discontented bishop (David Hyde Pierce), is faultless, fleshing out characters which might otherwise be dismissed as archetypes. The standout is Jones, who retains a sense of naivety and wonder even as she embraces worldly pleasures ('What's wrong with superficial?').

> "It's a pleasure to hear the syncopated rhythms of Sondheim's final new songs"

By Act Two, Zinn's spare white cube of a set has been taken over by an elaborate drawing room that would be at home in an Agatha Christie locked-room mystery. That's apt since the gang have finally gotten a meal, but are now trapped in this ornate room, bickering with each other and forced to turn a Ming vase into a toilet.

It's a clever notion to transfer the cast of *Discreet Charm* to the can't-escape room of *Exterminating Angel*, but it also makes it more difficult to follow through on that 1962 grisly proto-horror movie's plot. Can Sondheim and book writer David Ives really kill off these monsters they've sketched so melodiously and endearingly? You can understand how Sondheim got stuck – and why he signed off on stripping much of Act Two of music altogether. The characters, too, are stuck – frustrated by circumstances and only fitfully able to communicate with each other. (Naturally, it is Marianne who sees a path forward, in a heartfelt philosophical conversation with Pierce's wistfully wry priest.)

A sense of abandonment hangs over *Here We Are*. There is no way to know what shape this show might have taken had Sondheim not died in 2021, but director Joe Mantello's first-rate production, with his incomparable cast, makes a strong case for the virtues of what remains. After all, Buñuel's surrealism resists any effort to be explained away. 'What does anything *matteur*?' Bennett's French waitress asks at one point. 'It is what it is. Things are what they are.' In the end, we can be grateful for what Sondheim has left us.

Thom Geier

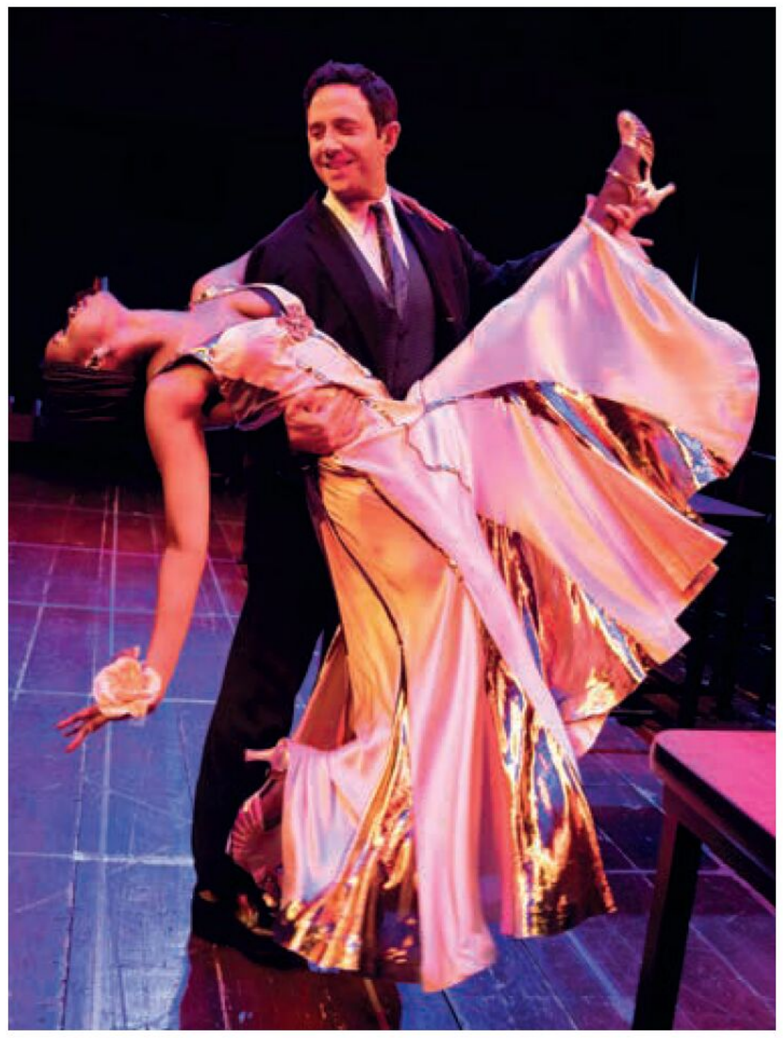
Production credits

Cast Francois Battiste, Tracie Bennett, Bobby Cannavale, Micaela Diamond, Amber Gray, Jin Ha, Rachel Bay Jones, Denis O'Hare, Steven Pasquale, David Hyde Pierce, Jeremy Shamos *et al*
Direction Joe Mantello
Choreography Sam Pinkleton
Music supervision Alexander Gemignani
Orchestrations Jonathan Tunick
Set, costumes David Zinn
Lighting Natasha Katz
Sound Tom Gibbons

PHOTOGRAPHY: Emilio Madrid

I Can Get It for You Wholesale

Harold Rome music, lyrics
Jerome Weidman book, revised by **John Weidman**
Classic Stage Company, New York 10 October – 17 December 2023
REVIEWED ON 1 NOVEMBER 2023



Rebecca Naomi Jones with Santino Fontana as antihero Harry; Sarah Steele, rising star Julia Lester and 'incomparable' Judy Kuhn; jazzy Joy Woods and Fontana

The 1962 show *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* seemed to be relegated to the dustbin of Musical Theatre history, known solely for featuring a little-known, 19-year-old Barbra Streisand in a supporting role two years before she conquered Broadway in *Funny Girl*. Despite receiving some positive reviews and running for 300 performances, *Wholesale* was a not-quite hit that hasn't been heard from since.

Well, Classic Stage Company's (CSC) compelling new production of *Wholesale* changes all that. I wouldn't go so far as to claim that it's a masterpiece, but it is an eminently engaging show with a delightfully tuneful score by Harold Rome (a largely forgotten composer despite having a solid success with 1954's *Fanny*) and a plot about Jewish families struggling to get by in a hostile world that, alas, seems only more relevant today. While Rome's enchanting, klezmer-tinged score remains mostly intact, the book has been revised by John Weidman (Sondheim's collaborator on *Pacific Overtures* and *Assassins*), son of the original librettist Jerome Weidman, who also authored the gritty novel on which the musical is based.

Wholesale takes place *c*1937 in Manhattan's Garment District where the Jewish working class who powered the American clothing industry are struggling to emerge from the Depression. Striver Harry Bogen decides he's had it with being downtrodden and is determined to give as good as he gets, swindling everyone in his orbit. Harry's utter ruthlessness and the score's breezier songs do make for a somewhat uneasy mix at times. It would take the genius of Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler to successfully wed such disparate elements 17 years later with *Sweeney Todd*.

Director Trip Cullman's pared-down production makes good use of every inch of CSC's intimate, immersive playing space. Ann Hould-Ward's spot-on period costumes in sepia and muted jewel tones transport us to the 1930s. Mark Wendland's spare set of movable tables and chairs is backed by a tableau of garment trade implements such as spindles and spools and bobbins stacked to wittily suggest the Manhattan skyline. And choreographer Ellenore Scott's movement reimagines Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers elegance for everyday folk.

> "The cast is stuffed with the kind of talent normally seen on much larger stages"

The cast is stuffed with the kind of Broadway talent normally seen on much larger stages. Tony winner Santino Fontana shines in the central role of Harry, crooning effortlessly in a resonant baritone. If I didn't entirely buy him as an unabashed shyster, a certain tonal inconsistency is somewhat baked into the show.

As his mother, the incomparable Judy Kuhn shines every minute she is onstage. Her achingly wise 'Too Soon' provides the show's most affecting moment as Kuhn expresses a deep well of love for her son even as she remains clear-eyed about his moral failings.

Rebecca Naomi Jones and Joy Woods offer a study in contrasts as Harry's love interests. Jones nails her character's paradoxical strength and vulnerability, even if she struggles vocally with keys seemingly chosen to lie right on her break. Woods shows less subtlety in her acting choices but sings like a dream and brings a scintillating jazziness to her numbers.

Best of all is the sensational Julia Lester in the Streisand role of the perpetually exasperated secretary, Miss Marmelstein. Lester in no way resembles her predecessor in looks, speech patterns or vocal timbre but shares her uncanny ability to ground an outsized character with surprising nuance while delivering a socko number. After her Little Red in *Into the Woods* and Martha in *The Secret Garden*, this is the third dazzling performance I've seen from Lester in just over a year, each one different, each one utterly exhilarating. If that isn't the definition of a star, I don't know what is. Perhaps history will repeat itself?

Jim Munson

Production credits

Cast Santino Fontana, Judy Kuhn, Rebecca Naomi Jones, Joy Woods, Julia Lester, Adam Chanler-Berat, Sarah Steele *et al*
Direction Trip Cullman
Music direction, orchestrations Jacinth Greywoode
Adaptation, arrangements David Chase
Choreography Ellenore Scott
Set Mark Wendland
Lighting Adam Honoré
Sound Sun Hee Kil
Costumes Ann Hould-Ward

PHOTOGRAPHY: Julieta Cervantes

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Recording reviews

The latest Musical Theatre recordings, reviewed by our esteemed panel of experts

17 Again

STUDIO CAST RECORDING
Alan Zachary, Michael Weiner music, lyrics
Marco Pennette book

"High energy with a strong sense of drive and groove throughout"

Cast Casey Likes, Drew Gehling, Eden Espinosa, Bryce Pinkham, Will Roland, Mallory Bechtel, Ann Harada *et al*
Album production Alan Zachary, Michael Weiner, August Eriksmoen
Orchestrations August Eriksmoen
Musical director Ben Cohn
Concord Theatricals Recordings/Warner Bros Theatre Ventures
RELEASED 1 DECEMBER 2023

The studio ensemble of 17 Again, a new teen musical that combines rock and pop with more stylised dramatic sounds

The studio cast recording of *17 Again* has all the vibes of a quintessential teen musical. Based on the film of the same name starring Zac Efron and the late Matthew Perry, this musical adaptation immediately transports the listener back to high school. With his family life falling apart around him, and wishing he could relive his youth, 35-year-old basketball player Mike O'Donnell is magically transformed back to his teenage self. Returning to school alongside his kids, he has to try to help them on to the right path as well as mend his marriage.

The album is very high energy with a strong sense of drive and groove throughout. The title song encapsulates the prevalence of rhythmic momentum that continues throughout the show with hooky riffs and punchy musical phrases. Even the ballad moments like 'Time for Starting Over' are on the front foot, perhaps with the exception of the lyrical opening to 'Love You Till Forever' which allows us to bathe in its lyricism for a little while. As this song develops however, it increasingly moves from tender closeness to belting anthemic outpouring – a much more outward-facing moment than its original intimacy suggests. A similar pattern is heard in 'Something So Perfect', and these emotional but grandscale moments are indicative of a score that has various singalong themes, playing right into the heart of the teen-pop musical genre.

The opening piano riff is an indication of the crystal-clear sound quality of the album, and the level of clarity and definition that follows. Each instrument cuts through to create a tight sound, adding further attack to the sound world. August Eriksmoen's orchestrations are to be commended, continually enlivening the energy while providing colourful character flavours. Amid the foundations of rock and pop are infusions of other more stylised sounds appropriate to specific dramatic moments, such as the Celtic influence of 'Tra La La'; the *Strictly*-inspired clubbing world of 'Make the Most of Tonight' and the ironically happy-go-lucky ska inspiration of 'Happily Family'.

Vocally, the album features a feast of award-winning Broadway stars. Casey Likes and Drew Gehling are vocally well-matched as Young Mike and Older Mike, which really enhances the storytelling during their duet together in 'The Greatest Prize' when both versions of Mike reach the same conclusion about their life. This is an album that is set to have fans of teen musicals dancing in the aisles.

Rebecca Applin

Beverley Knight: The Fifth Chapter

"Knight offers a peppy and pumping paean to female self-acceptance"

Tag8/BMG
RELEASED 29 SEPTEMBER 2023

No one could accuse Beverley Knight of celebrating her 50th birthday in a meek and demure fashion. With 'The Fifth Chapter', the 'Queen of British Soul' turned acclaimed West End Musical Theatre performer releases her first album in seven years, which

PHOTOGRAPHY: Photo Courtesy of Alan Zachary & Michael Weiner

amounts to her first selection of original material in 14. In collaboration with myriad songwriters and producers, Knight offers a peppy and pumping paean to female self-acceptance.

It is no surprise that the album's stand-out tracks are the two already-released singles, 'Last One On My Mind' and 'Systematic Overload'. The former gets the party started as the first listing, with Knight's sweeping, swooping voice providing a defiant rebuke to a former lover who was only there for the good times. Her appealing take-no-romantic-prisoners stance continues in track two, 'The One I'm Gonna Love'. That person is, of course, 'me': 'I'm going out with me and sleeping with myself'. Knight, it is joyously apparent, is not to be messed with.

The album encompasses Knight's key musical influences, from R&B and funk to Northern soul and ballad, and contains three collaborations with the London Community Gospel Choir; in 'I'm On Fire', their confident backing vocals are teamed with stylish rhythmic percussion clicks. The lyrics of too many songs have a habit of stating the obvious ('All we need is a little more faith / Get away from cynical debate' is a sentiment we could have lived without) and Knight is far better showcased when she is allowed to let rip with full-on funk.

After an unexpected swerve in mood with the lovestruck 'Not Prepared for You', she returns to up-tempo form in the vibrant 'Queen of Everything', in which she is out for a big night at a club, dressed to kill and waiting for the DJ to drop some killer tunes. So infectiously catchy is the mood that we long to be invited to join Knight's posse for this obviously epic evening. 'Systematic Overload' further hymns the eternal allure of the hours of darkness ('Dance until the clock stops turning time' is a line of notable sharpness, putting many others to shame), before Knight and the LCGC wrap things up with the rousing and reassuring 'Everything's Gonna Be Alright', that slogan so oft repeated during the pandemic. For a tantalising moment, with these 11 tracks ringing in our ears, we are tempted to believe her.

Fiona Mountford

Harmony

THE CAST RECORDING
Barry Manilow music
Bruce Sussman lyrics, book

> The Overture and 15 songs are jaunty, romantic and intensely dramatic

Cast Chip Zien, Sierra Boggess, Julie Benko, Sean Bell, Danny Kornfeld, Zal Owen, Eric Peters, Blake Roman, Steven Telsey *et al*
Musical arrangements Barry Manilow
Orchestrations Doug Walter
Orchestra / John O'Neill
Ghostlight Records
RELEASED DIGITALLY 31 AUGUST 2023

It can be an iffy proposition whenever a pop star composes a musical. Will they prove themselves capable of sustaining a narrative through a progression of songs or will their score sound like a random collection of their lesser hits? In the case of Barry Manilow's *Harmony*, which has finally landed on Broadway after circling for some 26 years, the answer is happily the former. It certainly helps that, in collaboration with lyricist and book writer Bruce Sussman, Manilow wisely chose a true story that is both compelling and naturally lends itself to musicalisation.

In Weimar-era Germany, a vocal sextet called the Comedian Harmonists had a brief, brilliant career before the rise of Nazism split them up. While this might suggest the makings of a dour, high-minded history lesson, Manilow and Sussman's score focuses more on the comedic and harmonistic elements of the scenario. The Overture plus 15 songs (refreshingly with nary a reprise) are jaunty, romantic and, especially the 11 o'clock number 'Threnody', intensely dramatic. If Manilow's tunes suggest the early 20th century via the 1960s (à la *Funny Girl*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Cabaret*), they are quite pleasing and often more than that. As one might expect from a music industry pro, Manilow has ensured the album has been given a top-notch recording with an augmented orchestra of 34 (!) players. This affords a dreamily lush sound to his arrangements and Doug Walter's orchestrations.

The six male leads harmonise beautifully, even though they are a bit underwhelming as soloists. That's likely the price paid for the way in which they were cast more for their ability to blend than to stand out. Making a more distinctive impression are silvery-voiced Sierra Boggess and especially up-and-coming Julie Benko (Alternate Fanny Brice in Broadway's *Funny Girl*). Benko has a yearning chest belt reminiscent of the young Judy Kuhn, and duets thrillingly with Boggess in the soprano-off 'Where You Go'. Chip Zien scores dramatically on the afore-mentioned 'Threnody', amazingly sounding not all that different to how he did 40-plus years ago in the original production of *March of the Falsettos*.

The recording ends, appropriately enough, by focusing back on the Harmonists in the rapturous 'Stars in the Night'. A wildly romantic ballad that sounds like something from an old Hollywood film, it may be the most beguiling melody Manilow has ever written and allows the sextet's otherworldly harmonies to shimmer and shine. It's so gorgeous that it will likely have you hitting 'repeat' the second its final sustained *pianissimo* fades into the ether.

Jim Munson

Rachel Tucker records her emotive new album at London's Umbrella Rooms

Rachel Tucker: ...You're Already Home

> A must for Tucker fans wanting to hear her in a new, personal light

Westway Music
RELEASED 3 NOVEMBER 2023

Formed only in 2020, Westway Music are on a roll, releasing original cast and live concert recordings, as well as albums of leading Musical Theatre names

in wider repertoire, from Rachel John singing gospel to Kerry Ellis belting rock. Their goal is to give MT stars the space to sing the music they love; each project is about showcasing passion, personality and ownership.

This love and stylistic breadth are clear in their latest release. Rachel Tucker found fame on TV's *I'd Do Anything* and then in the West End as the longest-running UK Elphaba in *Wicked*; here, she tackles pop, rock and Musical Theatre: everything from The Rolling Stones to Imagine Dragons, *My Fair Lady* to *Everybody's Talking About Jamie*.

It's a song from the latter that stands out as one highlight, underlining Tucker's range. 'He's My Boy' showcases not just her celebrated powerful belt, but also her soulful gentle lower register in the opening. This remains beautifully restrained, slowly growing with great control until a crashing *forte* three minutes in; the peak strikes ever more forcefully for this, Tucker resisting any temptation to over-sing early on. Beyond the voice, the arrangement swaps the original cast recording's repetitive piano chord accompaniment for a wash of strings and some gentle electric guitar. Dan Gillespie Sells and Tom MacRae's song is an emotional tour de force and this reading is no exception.

But my personal favourite comes from the world of pop: a slowed-down version of Lewis Capaldi's soul-searching 'Before You Go', written about the emotional aftermath of a suicide. Sam Young is a sensitive accompanist and the whole arrangement shouts class; restrained piano almost dropping out at the end, the well-controlled slowing down of the tempo, the beautiful quiet ending note, the key change before that and Tucker's stunning vibrato and dynamic control over the top of it. Somehow this reading exceeds the emotional punch of the original.

There is some other welcome partnering too, with ex-*Moulin Rouge's* Jamie Muscato joining for Billie Eilish's 'Happier Than Ever', while Jason Robert Brown is on the piano for his song 'It All Fades Away', from *The Bridges of Madison County*.

Generally, the accompaniment shows a pop-based approach, as opposed to Musical Theatre orchestration/arrangement where solo instruments pick up melodic material and there is a more active, polyphonic orchestral backdrop; the accompaniment in this album by and large takes a back seat, providing a warm glow and an unobtrusive framing to the vocal magic. This is a smart move: this is as much a pop/rock release as a Musical Theatre one, and so a must for Tucker fans wanting to hear her in a new and personal light. They say home is where the heart is, and Tucker is clearly at home here.

Jack Pepper

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street

2023 BROADWAY CAST RECORDING

Stephen Sondheim music, lyrics
Hugh Wheeler book
Christopher Bond original adaptation

> "Josh Groban is suitably hectoring in the melodrama"

Cast Josh Groban, Annaleigh Ashford, Jordan Fisher, Gaten Matarazzo, Maria Bilbao, Ruthie Ann Miles *et al*
Orchestrations Jonathan Tunick
Production Alex Lacamoire, Thomas Kail
Music supervision Alex Lacamoire
Conductor Fred Lassen
Arts Music/Reprise Records/Warner
RELEASED 8 SEPTEMBER 2023

Let's address the fatal flaw – the fly in the ointment, the toenail in the pie: Mrs Lovett's accent. Not quite sure where it's supposed to place her but it definitely ain't the East End of London. And it's not just the accent that derails Annaleigh Ashford's performance but everything else that she has commandeered from the Ministry of Funny Voices. It might help to see her, of course – which I haven't – but it's evident from every moment of her vocal performance that she plays each syllable for laughs. And Mrs Lovett, as we know, has a dark centre (as

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman / THE SOUND OF MUSIC ©1965 20th Century Studios, Inc. All rights reserved.

The 2023 Broadway revival of Sweeney Todd, starring Josh Groban (top) and Annaleigh Ashford (above, in purple), whose accent is 'the toenail in the pie'

witness Imelda Staunton in the Chichester/London production). This isn't pantomime, it's Sondheim. Heaven only knows why the director (Thomas Kail) didn't advise her to ditch the Cockney and play up her aspirations to be 'respectable' at all costs. That's surely the essence of the piece.

So there's a huge imbalance in the effect of the recording, though of course it's good to hear a biggish band (music supervisor Alex Lacamoire) delivering some operatic heft to the proceedings. The ensemble work is tight and immediate and punchy (conductor Fred Lassen) and most everybody else in the cast aside from Ashford sound convincingly anglicised. Josh Groban was always going to sound fabulous in the title role (a problem for some baritones because a lot of it is so low) and he is suitably hectoring in the melodrama and mellifluous in numbers like 'Pretty Women' and 'My Friends' – that most unlikely of love songs to cut-throat razors.

One small point: we need the explosion of chorus ('Lift your razor high, Sweeney!') – which is here cut – after the line 'So it is you, Benjamin Barker'. It's not a moment for end-of-track dead space.

There are also times – most particularly 'Epiphany' – where you want him to edge more precariously into the manic, and again the inspired jolt into 'A Little Priest' – 'That's all very well' – actually *sounds* like it was recorded separately. That number is one of the most inspired volte-faces in Musical Theatre and the grisly music hall banter about human pie fillings is all the funnier when the protagonists don't work too hard for the laughs. Again, Ashford's accent needs subtitles.

For the rest, Maria Bilbao's Johanna sounds rather pinched in the soprano stakes though at least she makes more of 'Green Finch' than birdsong. Gaten Matarazzo is a vibrant affecting Tobias (chilling at the close) and there is a ripe turn from John Rapson as Beadle Bamford.

But the wonder of this piece bowls you over afresh every time you hear it. So unless you especially want a souvenir of this production I remain loyal to the original Broadway cast of Cariou and Lansbury with a special place in my heart for the thrilling New York Philharmonic semi-staging (2000) with Hearn and LuPone if you want the operatic dimensions of the piece super-sized.

Edward Seckerson

Our hearts will be blessed with a definitive Sound of Music movie soundtrack

The Sound of Music

ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK RECORDING (FROM THE 1965 ROBERT WISE FILM)

Richard Rodgers music
Oscar Hammerstein II lyrics
Russel Crouse, Howard Lindsay book

> "The remastered sound is of pristine quality...in an acoustic of alpine clarity"

Cast Julie Andrews, Christopher Plummer *et al*
Remixing/remastering Mike Matessino
Orchestra / Irwin Kostal
Craft Recordings
RELEASED 1 DECEMBER 2023 (AVAILABLE IN MULTIPLE PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL FORMATS)

Here's a Christmas treat and a half: the soundtrack of Robert Wise's 1965 film version of *The Sound of Music*, remixed and remastered by restorationist Mike Matessino and released by Craft Recordings in formats ranging from a three-LP 'Picnic Meadow Green' limited edition to a multiple-disc CD and Blu-Ray 'Super Deluxe' box, with a range of other options in between. Since the original soundtrack LP sold in record-breaking numbers – and has subsequently been re-released with additional material on numerous occasions, including a 50th-anniversary edition in 2015 – it seems fair to ask what this new offering brings to the party.

Well, put it this way: that 2015 release contained some 26 musical tracks. This new set, even in its two-disc 'Deluxe' iteration (the most compact version), contains 46: all the surviving music from the film, including reprises, underscoring and purely instrumental numbers.

Rodgers and Hammerstein aficionados won't need reminding that the movie is a very different beast from the Broadway original, but what comes through here, particularly, is the sheer breadth of imagination that the film's arranger, Irwin Kostal, brought to the score: opening out Robert Russell Bennett's theatre orchestrations to match the visual scope of the movie.

Listen to the huge, glistening symphonic vista that precedes Julie Andrews's big entry in the opening Prelude – and note, too, the remastered sound, which is of pristine quality: shimmering *tremolandi* and woodwind birdsong glowing brighter than ever in an acoustic of (it's got to be said) alpine clarity. And then there are the sequences that haven't been heard on any previous release: instrumentals such as 'The Gazebo' (which toys gently with 'Sixteen Going on Seventeen') and the two extended 'Nocturnes': 'Captain and Elsa' and 'Captain and Maria'.

With Kostal, fresh from *West Side Story*, conducting a 90-strong orchestra (credited, pleasingly, in the comprehensive and anecdote-packed booklet), there's an urgency as well as a tenderness to these numbers that goes a long way to demonstrating how the film got its heart. The familiar songs emerge from Matessino's remastering with a special freshness and immediacy; but there's a warmth and sense of atmosphere to the choral items too (particularly the sequences in the Abbey) that I don't think I've heard matched on any previous release.

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Serious fans will want to invest in the four- or five-disc 'Super Deluxe' set which, as well as a complete remastering of the original 1965 album, includes two interviews with Richard Rodgers (characteristically understated as he muses on 'I Have Confidence', one of the two songs that he wrote specially for the movie – 'Homely or not, it was my kid'); a Marni Nixon demo of 'I Have Confidence' (treasurable on its own terms, while demonstrating just how right Wise was to cast a Maria with her own singing voice); and a complete orchestral run-through of the principal songs without vocals: the karaoke set of your dreams. And of course, it all sounds as bright as when it was new.

The definitive *Sound of Music* soundtrack recording? For the movie, without question. What we need now is an equally comprehensive restoration job on the original Broadway score – John Wilson, are you listening…?

Richard Bratby

The Time Traveller's Wife

ORIGINAL CAST RECORDING
Joss Stone, Dave Stewart
music, lyrics
Nick Finlow additional music
Kait Kerrigan additional lyrics

"The orchestrations are captured in a crystal-clear recorded sound"

Cast David Hunter, Joanna Woodward, Tim Mahendran, Hiba Elchikhe, Ross Dawes, Eve Corbishley *et al*
Orchestrations
Malcolm Edmonstone
Band / Nick Finlow, Katharine Woolley
Sony Masterworks Broadway
RELEASED 29 SEPTEMBER 2023

Time travel can't be kind to lovers. Based on the bestselling novel by Audrey Niffenegger, which was then adapted into the New Line Cinema film, this new musical tells the story of a time traveller and a sculptor who meet, fall in love and marry… but not in that order. Separated by time, they're always trying to reunite.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Johan Persson

Joanna Woodward and David Hunter tenderly convey their characters' love

And what a coming together of writing talent this show represents. The songs are penned by two-time BRIT Award winner Joss Stone and Eurythmics star Dave Stewart (with additional music by Nick Finlow and additional lyrics by Kait Kerrigan). There's a similarly neat pairing in David Hunter (as Henry) and Joanna Woodward (as Clare), who bring a welcome sense of clarity and poise to their vocals, suggesting the purity of their characters' love: not much Broadway belting, vibrato or over-singing here, just two people who fall in love and demonstrate this with a welcome vocal tenderness. Sample 'On And On', a beautiful duet between Hunter and Woodward, to hear how.

That said, many of the songs are pleasant but not hugely memorable. When the songwriters embrace their rock/pop sensibility – try the infectious groove in 'Damn Fool Love' or 'Journeyman' – they feel most at home, with a welcome contrast and broadening of the emotional palette. The driving rock rhythms really suit this story; the danger and thrill of time travel feels in need of more emphasis, beyond beautiful love and longing that after a while can sound, at least sonically in a single album sitting, slightly worn out.

This isn't helped by some on-the-nose lyrics. 'Who Are We' carries admirable sentiment but is expressed obviously: 'We've only got one life to live / There's just so much love to give / Let's put it back together / We don't have forever / So come on.'

Kudos to orchestrator Malcolm Edmonstone for colourful contributions, from bass guitar grooves to jazz organ, beautifully captured in a crystal-clear recorded sound that gives space to each musical layer. Indeed, I often found the orchestral colour more interesting and memorable than the melody itself, finding myself listening to the background more than the foreground tune.

There's plenty to like, but not necessarily enough to *love*. The songs are well written and well performed, but it all feels a little restrained and functional. It's nice to listen to, perfectly inoffensive – but I wanted something to get the pulse racing faster. Love and time travel are, after all, more than a little dangerous.

Jack Pepper

Whatever Happens Next

Matthew Harvey
music, lyrics

"This release is a reassuring reminder that there's a lot of new writing to discover"

Cast Sharon Rose, Hadley Fraser, Alexia Khadime, Courtney Stapleton, Tyrone Huntley, Eloise Davies *et al*
Production
Matthew Whittington
Music supervision
Freddie Tapner
Band Matthew Harvey, Dejeanté Hinks, Jessie Linden, Yshani Perinpanayagam, Meelie Traill
Matthew Harvey Music
RELEASED DIGITALLY
20 NOVEMBER 2023

New musicals fans, listen up! This debut album from British composer and performer Matthew Harvey showcases songs from five new projects. Best known among them is the critically acclaimed song cycle *Now or Never*, as seen at the Barn Theatre; streamed there during the pandemic, its theme of hope in the face of catastrophe proved apt.

That show opens and closes this album. We start with Harvey singing 'The Road', which was a finalist in the 2021 Stiles and Drewe Best New Song Prize. It features occasional unexpected chords (major going to minor under the line 'wherever it goes', helping us avoid anything musically too sweet) and lyrics that are neatly both colloquial and poetic. Harvey's writing also

has a welcome knack of the succinct; short melodic phrases and a lack of word clutter make these songs really speak. Try the hooky 'One Two Three' from *Reveries* to hear that in action, as sung by a soulful Sharon Rose (and a sassy backing choir at the end – although perhaps this could have entered sooner).

That last number is my standout, alongside one from *Unplugged*, a song that has the same memorable and punchy qualities; the title line of 'Twist My Words' is set to a catchy melodic phrase, which Eloise Davies sings with searing intensity before dropping down to quiet resignation at the end. And what an ending, with the piano abruptly dropping out – a cliff-hanger conclusion that makes the song even more intense.

In terms of textures, there are especially imaginative ones in 'Only You' from *Kindred*; listen at 2'15" in for a string breakdown that speaks to a wider sense of instrumental colour which shines through each accompaniment. Sometimes these accompaniments feel slightly overwritten – earlier in this song, I found the busy piano rhythms could distract from the words – but equally, there's a beautiful moment later where just one piano line accompanies the two voices, before dropping out entirely. There's an almost classical awareness of texture which creates a welcome sense of contrast.

It's wonderfully encouraging to see new Musical Theatre getting a recording platform like this. As well as spotlighting an emerging creative voice (who only started writing in the pandemic), it's also a celebration of the structures in place to support composers like Matthew Harvey, from Help Musicians (a charity which supported this release) to director-producer Michael Grandage's MGC Futures Bursary, which was awarded to Harvey in 2022 to support *Reveries*. This release is a reassuring reminder that there's a lot of new writing to discover – and willing supporters, too. At a time when it's so difficult to get new MT work heard, this album is a beacon to the possible.

Jack Pepper

The Wild About You recording's creative team, including the composer, lyricist and performer Chilina Kennedy (centre)

Wild About You

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING
Chilina Kennedy music, lyrics
Eric Holmes book

"Powerhouse vocals are gussied up in super-shiny high-tech production values"

Cast Chilina Kennedy, Jessie Mueller, Lea Salonga, Katharine McPhee, Alex Newell, Jay McKenzie *et al*
Orchestrations/arrangements Daniel Edmonds
Additional arrangements Chris Jago, Meg Toohey
Additional scoring Nicholas Cheng
Lead production Brian Spector, Daniel Edmonds
Band / Daniel Edmonds Broadway Records
RELEASED 17 NOVEMBER 2023

This, I guess, is what you call a musical evolution. A song cycle by singer/songwriter Chilina Kennedy (best known for portraying Carole King in *Beautiful* on Broadway) evolving into a stage musical, the narrative of songs now aligning with a book by multiple award-winning writer Eric Holmes whose incisive work on *The Good Fight* for Paramount+ has delighted so many of us. Even the title has evolved, *With(out) Her* becoming *Call It Love* becoming *Wild About You*.

The storyline is nothing if not unusual, with heroine Olivia regaining consciousness in hospital with limited memory and a desperate need to establish which of the loves of her life might be her emergency contact. Intriguing? I guess so.

It's hard, if not impossible, with a 'concept album' such as this to ascertain with any certainty how the songs might chime dramatically with the finished narrative. So all one can do is assess them in their own right and decide if one's appetite is sufficiently whetted to hear them 'in context', as it were. My first impressions of the score are focused on its 'nowness'. There's a punchy, rocky, in-your-face immediacy to it. My mind was cast back to Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey's *Next to Normal* but, dare I say it, without its innate poetry. Then again, just as you are thinking there is something all too generic about the rock/pop style, along comes a twist to make you think again. Context will be key, I suspect.

One thing is for sure: a succession of powerhouse vocals are gussied up in super-shiny high-tech production values. The album sounds absolutely great and everything punches home in Daniel Edmonds's orchestrations. Some numbers had me hitting replay: 'Gold', which features *Waitress*'s Jessie Mueller, is a haunting ballad with echoes of 'She Used to Be Mine'; 'Fast Train' featuring Jay McKenzie reminds me of *Rent* – a high-velocity, high-octane rocker; 'Dangerous Lines' with Alex Newell is very fierce, very now; 'Without You' has all the makings of a pop hit especially in its catchy 'scat' refrain; Aisha Jackson delivers a soulful ache, wailing up a storm with 'I Wouldn't Call It Love'; and there's a full-on 11 o'clock number, 'Here', with a thrilling power vocal from Lea Salonga.

But just as I'm itching to find out how the drama pans out, I shall reserve judgement until I've seen the show and discovered if the sung and spoken words are a good fit for each other.

Edward Seckerson

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with Edward Seckerson

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UK
London: West End, Off West End

ABBA Voyage
ABBA ARENA
Booking until 26 May 2024
abbavoyage.com

Back to the Future: The Musical
ADELPHI THEATRE
Booking until 21 Jul 2024
backtothefuturemusical.com

The Book of Mormon
PRINCE OF WALES THEATRE
Booking until 30 Dec 2023
thebookofmormonmusical.com

Bronco Billy
CHARING CROSS THEATRE
23 Jan-7 Apr 2024
charingcrosstheatre.co.uk

Cabaret
PLAYHOUSE THEATRE (KIT KAT CLUB)
Booking until 28 Sep 2024
kitkat.club

The Choir of Man
ARTS THEATRE
Booking until 18 Feb 2024
choirofman.com

CRAZY COQS
BRASSERIE ZEDEL

Ross Harmon: A Positively Emerald Christmas
4 Dec 2023

The West End Sings... Christmas at the Musicals
10 Dec 2023

Elaine Delmar Returns: More from her Musical Bottom Drawer
15 Dec 2023

brasseriezedel.com

Crazy for You
GILLIAN LYNNE THEATRE
Booking until 31 Dec 2023
crazyforyoumusical.com

Diana: The Musical
EVENTIM APOLLO
4 December 2023
eventimappollo.com

ELF
DOMINION THEATRE
Booking until 6 Jan 2024
elflondon.com

Frozen
THEATRE ROYAL DRURY LANE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
frozenthemusical.co.uk

Guys & Dolls
BRIDGE THEATRE
Booking until 31 Aug 2024
bridgetheatre.co.uk

Hamilton
VICTORIA PALACE THEATRE
Booking until 28 Sep 2024
hamiltonmusical.com

Jersey Boys
TRAFALGAR THEATRE
Booking until 4 Jan 2024
jerseyboysmusical.co.uk

The King and I
Dominion Theatre
20 Jan-2 March 2024
kingandimusical.co.uk

The Lion King
LYCEUM THEATRE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
thelionking.co.uk

The Little Big Things
@SOHOPLACE
Booking until 2 Mar 2024
sohoplace.org

Mamma Mia!
NOVELLO THEATRE
Booking until 28 Sep 2024
mamma-mia.com

Mamma Mia! The Party
THE 02
Booking until 15 Jun 2025
mammamiatheparty.co.uk

Matilda The Musical
CAMBRIDGE THEATRE
Booking until 15 Dec 2024
matildathemusical.com

Les Misérables
SONDHEIM THEATRE
Booking until 28 Sep 2024
lesmis.com

Lizzie
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE ELEPHANT
Until 2 Dec 2023
southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

Moulin Rouge! The Musical
PICCADILLY THEATRE
Booking until 30 Mar 2024
moulinrougemusical.co.uk

Mrs Doubtfire The Musical
SHAFTESBURY THEATRE
Booking until 29 Sep 2024
mrsdoubtfiremusical.co.uk

My Favourite Things: The Rodgers and Hammerstein 80th Anniversary Concert
THEATRE ROYAL DRURY LANE
12 Dec 2023
lwtheatres.co.uk

My Neighbour Totoro
BARBICAN THEATRE
Booking until 23 Mar 2024
barbican.org.uk

Oh What a Lovely War
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE BOROUGH
Until 9 Dec 2023
southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

Operation Mincemeat
FORTUNE THEATRE
Booking until 15 Jun 2024
operationmincemeat.com

Pacific Overtures
MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY
Booking until 24 Feb 2024
menierchocolatefactory.com

The Phantom of the Opera
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE
Booking until 28 Sep 2024
thephantomoftheopera.com

PIZZAEXPRESS LIVE

Nathan Martin
Piano Lounge Covent Garden
1, 7 Dec 2023

Birgit and Wilma – 'Jingle Belles'
The Pheasantry, Chelsea
5 Dec 2023

Christina Bianco – The More the Merrier!
The Pheasantry, Chelsea
8-9 Dec 2023

Let Me Sing... Open Mic Night with Nathan Martin and Sarah Lark
The Pheasantry, Chelsea
13 Dec 2023

Marti Webb and Her 'Good Companions'
The Pheasantry, Chelsea
19-20 Dec 2023

Mark Lester – 'But More on That Later'
The Pheasantry, Chelea
5 Jan 2024

Jake Shears is The Emcee in Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club, alongside Rebecca Lucy Taylor aka Self Esteem as Sally Bowles

PHOTOGRAPHY: Marc Brenner / The Other Richard

The company of the touring production of The Drifters Girl led by Carly Mercedes Dyer – upcoming tour stops include Bristol, Stoke-on-Trent and Llandudno

Sunday Afternoons at the Musicals
PizzaExpress Live, Holborn
14 Jan 2024

Let Me Sing... Open Mic Night with Nathan Martin and Caroline Sheen
The Pheasantry, Chelsea
17 Jan 2024

pizzaexpresslive.com

Showstopper! The Improvised Musical
CAMBRIDGE THEATRE
Booking until 18 Dec 2023
showstopperthemusical.com

SIX
VAUDEVILLE THEATRE
Booking until 3 Nov 2024
sixthemusical.com

Stephen Sondheim's Old Friends
GIELGUD THEATRE
Booking until 6 Jan 2024
sondheimoldfriends.com

Sunset Boulevard
SAVOY THEATRE
Booking until 6 Jan 2024
sunsetboulevardwestend.com

The Time Traveller's Wife: The Musical
APOLLO THEATRE
Booking until 30 Mar 2024
timetravellerswife.com

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical
ALDWYCH THEATRE
Booking until 14 Sep 2024
tinathemusical.com

Two Strangers (Carry A Cake Across New York)
KILN THEATRE
Until 20 Jan 2024
kilntheatre.com

Unfortunate: The Untold Story of Ursula the Sea Witch
SOUTHWARK PLAYHOUSE
8 Dec 2023-17 Feb 2024
southwarkplayhouse.co.uk

West End Musical Christmas
ADELPHI THEATRE
12 Dec 2023
lwtheatres.co.uk

Wicked
APOLLO VICTORIA THEATRE
Booking until 15 Dec 2024
wickedthemusical.co.uk

The Witches
NATIONAL THEATRE, OLIVIER
Booking until 27 Jan 2024
nationaltheatre.org.uk

You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown
UPSTAIRS AT THE GATEHOUSE
14 Dec 2023-14 Jan 2024
upstairsatthegatehouse.com

Touring: Major Shows

Aladdin
WALES MILLENIUM CENTRE, Cardiff, **7 Dec-14 Jan**
THEATRE ROYAL PLYMOUTH, **17 Jan-11 Feb**
aladdinthemusical.co.uk

The Bodyguard
NEW THEATRE, Oxford, **until 2 Dec**
THE ALEXANDRA, Birmingham, **4-30 Dec**
THEATRE ROYAL GLASGOW, **3-7 Jan**
thebodyguardmusical.com

Calendar Girls
HULL NEW THEATRE, **until 2 Dec**
kenwright.com

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
THE BORD GÁIS ENERGY, Dublin, **5-7 Dec**
KING'S THEATRE GLASGOW, **23 Jan-4 Feb**
charlieandthechocolatefactory.co.uk

The Drifters Girl
BRISTOL HIPPODROME, **9-13 Jan**
REGENT THEATRE, Stoke on Trent, **16-20 Jan**
VENUE CYMRU, Llandudno, **23-27 Jan**
thedriftersgirl.com

Elf: The Musical Arena Spectacular
BOURNEMOUTH INTERNATIONAL CENTRE, **15-16 Dec**
WESTPOINT EXETER, **18-10 Dec**
AO ARENA, Manchester, **23-24 Dec**
FIRST DIRECT ARENA, Leeds, **27-18 Dec**
UTILITA ARENA, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, **30-31 Dec**
THE BRIGHTON CENTRE, **5-6 Jan**
elfthemusicaluk.com

Everybody's Talking About Jamie
VENUE CYMRU, Llandudno, **until 2 Dec**
NEW THEATRE, Oxford, **12-30 Dec**
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton, **9-14 Jan**
GRAND THEATRE, Wolverhampton, **23-27 Jan**
everybodystalkingaboutjamie.co.uk

Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World
NEW WIMBLEDON THEATRE, London, **until 2 December**
THE LOWRY, Salford, **5-7 Jan**
WALES MILLENNIUM CENTRE, 17-21 Jan
MILTON KEYNES THEATRE, **24-27 Jan**
fantasticallygreatwomenthemusical.com

Hamilton
MANCHESTER PALACE THEATRE, **until 24 Feb**
hamiltonmusical.com

I Should Be So Lucky
WALES MILLENIUM CENTRE, Cardiff, **until 2 Dec**
THEATRE ROYAL PLYMOUTH, **4-9 Dec**
LEEDS GRAND THEATRE & OPERA HOUSE, **12-30 Dec**
ORCHARD THEATRE, Dartford, **8-13 Jan**
LYCEUM THEATRE, Sheffield, **16-20 Jan**
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton, **23-27 Jan**
soluckymusical.com

Jesus Christ Superstar
ALHAMBRA THEATRE, Bradford, until **2 Dec**
NOTTINGHAM ROYAL CONCERT HALL, **8-13 Jan**
REGENT THEATRE, Ipswich, **15-20 Jan**
WALES MILLENIUM CENTRE, **29 Jan-3 Feb**
jesuschristsuperstar.com

The King and I
CONGRESS THEATRE, Eastbourne, **13-23 Dec**
THE LOWRY, Salford, **9-13 Jan**
kingandimusical.co.uk

Oh What a Lovely War
YVONNE ARNAUD THEATRE, Guilford, **23 -27 Jan**
MAST STUDIOS, Southampton, **29-31 Jan**
blackeyedtheatre.co.uk

Pretty Woman
NEW VICTORIA THEATRE, Woking, **until 2 Dec**
NEW THEATRE, Oxford, **4-9 Dec**
STOCKTON GLOBE, Stockton on Tees, **14-30 Dec**
HIS MAJESTY'S THEATRE, Aberdeen, **15-20 Jan**
LIVERPOOL EMPIRE, **23 Jan-3 Feb**
london.prettywomanthemusical.com/tour

The Rocky Horror Show
SUNDERLAND EMPIRE, **23-28 Jan**
BORD GAIS ENERGY THEATRE, Dublin, **15-29 Jan**
rockyhorror.co.uk

Shrek The Musical
GRAND OPERA HOUSE, York, **until 2 Dec**
WINTER GARDENS, Blackpool, **12-30 Dec**
KING'S THEATRE, Glasgow, **15-20 Jan**
PLAYHOUSE THEATRE, Edinburgh, **22-27 Jan**
shrekuktour.com

Sister Act The Musical
EMPIRE, Sunderland, until **2 Dec**
sisteractthemusical.co.uk

Lucy St Louis and Alexia Khadime share a moment as Glinda and Elphaba in Wicked at the Apollo Victoria Theatre – the show also tours the UK until January 2025

SIX
ROYAL & DERNGATE, Northampton,
28 Nov-2 Dec
REGENT THEATRE, Stoke, **5-9 Dec**
THEATRE ROYAL BRIGHTON,
19 Dec-6 Jan
SWANSEA ARENA, **9-14 Jan**
CLIFFS PAVILLION, Southend, **16-21 Jan**
WATERSIDE THEATRE, Aylesbury,
23-28 Jan
sixthemusical.com

The Wizard of Oz
LIVERPOOL EMPIRE, **13 Dec-7 Jan**
NEW THEATRE OXFORD, **9-14 Jan**
MAYFLOWER THEATRE, Southampton,
16-21 Jan
HULL NEW THEATRE, **24-27 Jan**
uktour.wizardofozmusical.com

Major Regional Theatres

Bristol Hippodrome Theatre
The Drifters Girl
9-13 Jan
Wicked
23 Jan-25 Feb
atgtickets.com

Curve Leicester
Evita
Until 13 Jan
curveonline.co.uk

Festival Theatre, Pitlochry
Sunshine on Leith
Until 23 Dec
pitlochryfestivaltheatre.com

Grand Opera House, York
Shrek The Musical
Until 2 Dec
atgtickets.com

Hope Mill Theatre, Manchester
To Wong Foo The Musical
Until 17 Dec
hopemilltheatre.co.uk

King's Theatre, Glasgow
Shrek The Musical
15-30 Jan
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
23 Jan-4 Feb
atgtickets.com

Leeds Playhouse
Oliver!
Until 27 Jan
leedsplayhouse.org.uk

Liverpool Empire
The Wizard of Oz
13 Dec-7 Jan
atgtickets.com

The Lowry, Salford
The Good Enough Mums Club
Until 2 Dec
The King and I
9-13 Jan
thelowry.com

Mayflower Theatre, Southampton
Everybody's Talking About Jamie
9-14 Jan
The Wizard of Oz
16-21 Jan
I Should Be So Lucky
23-27 Jan
mayflower.org.uk

Mill at Sonning
High Society
Until 20 Jan
millatsonning.com

Milton Keynes Theatre
Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World
24-27 Jan
atgtickets.com

New Theatre, Oxford
The Bodyguard
Until 2 Dec
Pretty Woman
4-9 Dec
Everybody's Talking About Jamie
12-30 Dec
The Wizard of Oz
10-14 Jan
atgtickets.com

New Wimbledon Theatre, London
Fantastically Great Women Who Changed the World
Until 2 Dec
atgtickets.com

Palace Theatre, Manchester
Hamilton
Until 24 Feb
atgtickets.com

Sheffield Lyceum
I Should Be So Lucky
16-20 Jan
sheffieldtheatres.co.uk

Theatre Royal Plymouth
I Should Be So Lucky
4-9 Dec
Aladdin
17 Jan-11 Feb
theatreroyal.com

US Broadway

& Juliet
STEPHEN SONDHEIM THEATRE
Booking until 15 Sep 2024
andjulietbroadway.com

Aladdin
NEW AMSTERDAM THEATRE
Booking until 16 Jun 2024
aladdinthemusical.com

Back to the Future: The Musical
WINTER GARDEN THEATRE
Booking until 21 Jul 2024
backtothefuturemusical.com/newyork

A Beautiful Noise: The Neil Diamond Musical
BROADHURST THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
abeautifulnoisethemusical.com

The Book of Mormon
EUGENE O'NEILL THEATRE
Booking until 28 Apr 2024
bookofmormonbroadway.com

Chicago
AMBASSADOR THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
chicagothemusical.com

Days of Wine and Roses
STUDIO 54
28 Jan-28 Apr 2024
daysofwineandrosesbroadway.com

Gutenberg! The Musical!
JAMES EARL JONES THEATRE
Booking until 28 Jan 2024
gutenbergbway.com

Hadestown
WALTER KERR THEATRE
Booking until 16 Jun 2024
hadestown.com

Hamilton
RICHARD RODGERS THEATRE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
hamiltonmusical.com

Harmony
ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
hamiltonmusical.com

How to Dance in Ohio
BELASCO THEATRE
Until 16 Jun 2024
howtodanceinohiomusical.com

Kimberly Akimbo
BOOTH THEATRE
Booking until 30 April 2024
kimberlyakimbothemusical.com

The Lion King
MINSKOFF THEATRE
Booking until 16 Jun 2024
lionking.com

Merrily We Roll Along
HUDSON THEATRE
Booking until 24 Mar 2024
merrilyonbroadway.com

MJ The Musical
NEIL SIMON THEATRE
Booking until 26 May 2024
mjthemusical.com

Moulin Rouge! The Musical
AL HIRSCHFELD THEATRE
Booking until 1 Sep 2024
moulinrougemusical.com

Shucked
NEDERLANDER THEATRE
Booking until 14 Jan 2024
shuckedmusical.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: Matt Crockett / Emilio Madrid

SIX
BROOKS ATKINSON THEATRE
Booking until 8 Sep 2024
sixonbroadway.com

Some Like It Hot
SHUBERT THEATRE
Booking until 30 Dec 2023
somelikeithotmusical.com

Spamalot
ST JAMES THEATRE
Booking until 28 Apr 2024
stjamestheatrenyc.com

Sweeney Todd
LUNT-FONTANNE THEATRE
Booking until 5 May 2024
sweeneytoddbroadway.com

Wicked
GERSHWIN THEATRE
Booking until 23 Jun 2024
wickedthemusical.com

Off Broadway

Buena Vista Social Club
ALLANTIC THEATER COMPANY
Until 31 Dec 2023
atlantictheatrer.com

Friends! The Musical Parody
THEATRE CENTRE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
theatrercenter.com

The Gardens of Anuncia
MITZI E NEWHOUSE THEATRE
Until 31 Dec 2023
lct.org

Here We Are
THE SHED
Booking until 21 Jan 2024
theshed.org

Hell's Kitchen
PUBLIC THEATRE
Booking until 14 Jan 2024
theshed.org

I Can Get It for You Wholesale
CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY
Until 10 Dec 2023
publictheater.org

Little Shop of Horrors
WESTSIDE THEATRE
Booking until 5 Jan 2025
littleshopnyc.com

The Office! A Musical Parody!
THE THEATER CENTRE
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
theofficeoffbroadway.com

SAW The Musical
AMT THEATRE
Booking until 15 Jan 2024
sawthemusical.com

Sesame Street The Musical
THEATER 555
Booking until 31 Dec 2023
theater555.venuetix.com

Singfield! A Musical About Nothing!
THEATER 555
Booking until 2 Jun 2024
theatrercenter.com

Titanique: Une Parodie Musicale
DARYL ROTH THEATRE
Booking until 16 June 2024
titaniquemusical.com

True Crime: The Musical
PLAYERS THEATRE
Booking until 9 Dec 2023
theplayerstheatre.com

Walk On Through: Confessions Of A Museum Novice
MCC THEATRE SPACE
Until 10 Dec 2023
mcctheater.org

International

& Juliet
CROWN THEATRE, Perth
30 Dec 2023-21 Jan 2024
crownperth.com.au

42nd Street
PRINCESS OF WALES THEATRE, Toronto
9 Dec 2023-21 Jan 2024
toronto-theatre.com

Aida
AFAS CIRCUSTHEATER
SCHEVENINGEN, The Hague
Booking until 31 Jan 2024
stage-entertainment.nl

Ain't Too Proud
ED MIRVISH THEATRE, Toronto
7-13 Dec 2024
toronto-theatre.com

Aladdin
TEATRO COLISEUM, Madrid
Booking until 4 Feb 2024
stage.es/musicales/Aladdin

Aladdin
DENTSU SHIKI THEATRE UMI, Tokyo
Booking until 30 Jun 2024
shiki.jp

Anastasia
TEATRO TELCEL, Mexico City
Booking until 30 Nov 2023
anastasiaelmusical.mx

Brigadoon
SHAW FESTIVAL THEATRE, Ontario
Until 23 Dec 2023
shawfest.com

Cats
NAGOYA SHIKI THEATRE, Nagoya
Booking until 12 May 2024
shiki.jp

Chicago
NATIONAL THEATRE CHEBANCA, Milan
Until 28 Jan 2024
teatronanazionale.it

Dance of the Vampires
STAGE OPERETTENHAUS, Hamburg
Booking until 15 Sep 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Disney's Frozen
THEATRE AN DER ELBE Hamburg
Booking until 31 Aug 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Disney's Frozen
JR EAST SHIKI THEATER HARU, Tokyo
Booking until 30 Jun 2024
shiki.jp

The Lion King
MOGADOR THEATRE, Paris
Booking until 5 May 2024
theatremogador.com

The Lion King
THEATER IM HAFEN, Hamburg
Booking until 22 Dec 2024
stage-entertainment.de

The Lion King
THEATRO LOPE DE VEGA, Madrid
Booking until 3 Dec 2023
stage.es/musicales/el-rey-leon

The Lion King
ARIAKE SHIKI THEATRE, Tokyo
Booking until 30 Jun 2024
shiki.jp

Mamma Mia!
STAGE THEATER NEUE FLORA, Hamburg
Booking until 21 Jan 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Mamma Mia!
RIALTO THEATER, Madrid
Booking until 24 Mar 2024
mammamiaelmusical.es

Mamma Mia!
CASINO DE PARIS, Paris
Until 21 Jan 2024
mammamia-lemusical.com

Pretty Woman The Musical
TEATRO EDP GRAN VIA, Madrid
Booking until 28 Feb 2024
prettywomanelmusical.com

Pretty Woman The Musical
BEATRIX THEATRE, Utrecht
Booking until 30 Dec 2023
stage-entertainment.nl

Romeo & Juliet – Love is Everything
THEATRE DES WESTENS, Berlin
Booking until 4 Jan 2024
stage-entertainment.de

SIX
ROYAL ALEXANDRA THEATRE, Toronto
Booking until 17 Dec 2023
toronto-theatre.com

Spamalot
THÉÂTRE DE PARIS, Paris
Booking until 28 Apr 2024
theatredeparis.com

Starlight Express
STARLIGHT-EXPRESS-THEATRE, Bochum
Booking until 31 Mar 2024
starlight-express.de

Tarzan
STAGE PALLADIUM THEATRE, Stuttgart
Booking until 22 Sep 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical
STAGE APOLLO THEATRE, Stuttgart
Booking until 28 Jan 2024
stage-entertainment.de

Tina: The Tina Turner Musical
THEATRE ROYAL, Sydney
Booking until 31 Dec 2023
tinathemusical.com.au

David Hyde Pierce (left) plays a bishop in Here We Are, Stephen Sondheim's final musical currently playing Off Broadway

Access and relaxed performances (UK)

Aladdin
Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff
Captioned: **15 Dec, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **7 Jan, 6pm**
Relaxed: **10 Jan, 6:30pm**
BSL: **11 Jan, 7:30pm**
Sunderland Empire
Audio described: **6 Mar, 7:30**
Relaxed: **7 Mar, 6:30pm**
Captioned: **8 Mar, 7:30pm**

Back to the Future
Adelphi Theatre
Autism friendly/relaxed: **10 Mar, 3pm**

Bonnie and Clyde
Palace Theatre Manchester
BSL: **9 May**

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
King's Theatre, Glasgow
Captioned: **25 Jan, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **1 Feb, 7:30pm**

Come From Away
Liverpool Empire
Audio described: **18 Mar, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **20 Mar, 7:30pm**
New Theatre Oxford
Audio described: **24 Apr, 2:30pm**
Captioned: **25 Apr, 7:30pm**
BSL: **27 Apr, 2:30pm**

Everybody's Talking About Jamie
New Theatre Oxford
BSL: **17 Dec, 2:30pm**
Audio described: **22 Jan, 7:30pm**

Frozen
Theatre Royal Drury Lane
(GalaPro app available for all performances)
Audio described: **1 Feb, 7pm**
BSL: **3 March, 1pm**
Autism friendly/relaxed: **24 Apr, 1pm**

Grease
Edinburgh Playhouse
Audio described: **27 Jun, 7:30pm**

Hamilton
Victoria Palace Theatre
(GalaPro app available for all performances)
Palace Theatre Manchester
BSL: **30 Nov, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **5 Dec, 7:30pm; 13 Feb, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **6 Dec, 7:30pm; 31 Jan, 7:30pm**
Bristol Hippodrome
Captioned: **23 May, 7:30pm**
BSL/audio described: **15 May, 7:30pm**

Jesus Christ Superstar
Bristol Hippodrome
Audio described: **14 Mar**

Madagascar the Musical
Opera House Manchester
Audio described: **8 Feb 2024, 7pm**
Relaxed: **10 Feb, 2pm**
Liverpool Empire
Audio described: **30 Mar, 3pm**
BSL: **31 Mar, 2:30pm**
New Wimbledon Theatre
Captioned/audio described: **11 May, 11am**

A whole new world: the Aladdin tour is offering multiple access performances over Christmas and into the new year

Mamma Mia!
Novello Theatre
Captioned: **4 Feb, 1:30pm**
Audio described: **25 Feb, 2:30pm**

Matilda
Cambridge Theatre
Captioned: **23 Mar, 2:30pm; 12 May, 3pm; 16 Jun, 3pm**
Audio described: **24 Mar, 3pm; 11 May, 2:30pm;**
BSL: **6 Mar, 2pm; 8 Apr, 7:30pm**
Autism friendly/chilled: **16 Jun, 3pm**

Mrs Doubtfire
Shaftesbury Theatre
Relaxed: **20 Jan, 2:30pm**

An Officer and a Gentleman
Grand Opera House York
Audio described: **8 Jun, 2:30pm**

Operation Mincemeat
Fortune Theatre
BSL: **6 May, 7.30pm**

Pretty Woman
Stockton Globe
Audio described: **20 Dec, 7:30pm**
Liverpool Empire
Audio described: **24 Jan, 7:30pm**
BSL: **30 Jan, 7:30pm**
Grand Opera House York
BSL: **24 Feb, 2:30pm**
Edinburgh Playhouse
Audio described: **4 Apr, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **9 Apr, 7:30pm**
BSL: **11 Apr, 7:30pm**

Shrek
Grand Opera House York
Audio described: **1 Dec, 7:30pm**
BSL: **6 Dec, 6pm**
King's Theatre Glasgow
Audio described: **16 Jan, 7:30pm**

Sister Act
King's Theatre Glasgow
Captioned: **2 May, 7:30pm**
Theatre Royal Brighton
Audio described: **14 Mar, 2:30pm**
Palace Theatre, Manchester
Audio described: **25 Mar, 7:30pm**

SIX
Vaudeville Theatre
Audio described: **28 Apr, 4pm**
Captioned: **21 Apr, 4pm**
BSL: **13 Apr, 4pm**
Regent Theatre Stoke
BSL: **6 Dec, 6pm**
Theatre Royal Brighton
BSL and audio described: **21 Dec, 8pm**
Captioned: **3 Jan, 5pm**
Liverpool Empire
Audio described: **24 May, 7:30pm**
Edinburgh Playhouse
Audio described: **13 Jun, 8pm**
New Theatre Oxford
Captioned: **26 Jun, 8pm**

Standing at the Sky's Edge
Gillian Lynne Theatre
Audio described: **13 Mar, 2:30pm**
Captioned: **26 Mar, 7:30pm**
BSL: **23 May, 7:30pm; 22 Jun, 2:30pm**

The Time Traveller's Wife
Apollo Theatre
Audio described: **13 Jan, 2:30pm**
BSL: **7 Feb, 7:30pm**

Two Strangers (Carry a Cake across New York)
Kiln Theatre
Audio described: **30 Nov, 7:30pm**

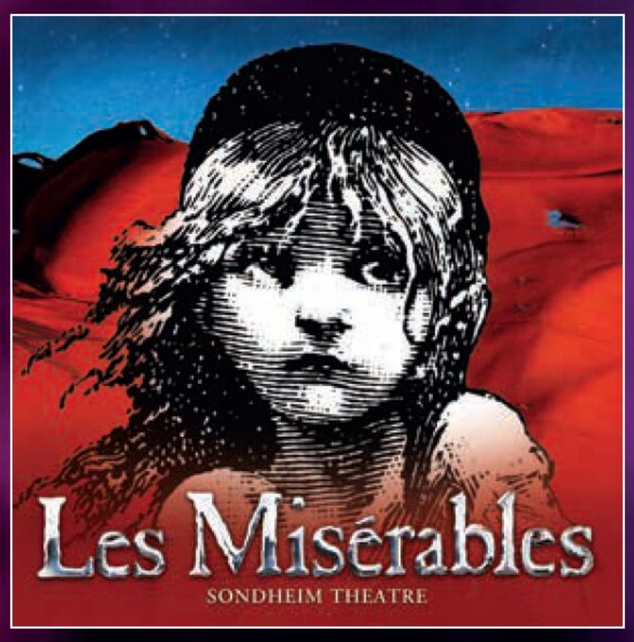
Wicked
Apollo Victoria Theatre
Captioned: **3 Mar, 2:30pm**
BSL: **5 May, 7:30pm**
Audio described: **21 Mar, 7:30pm**
Edinburgh Playhouse
Audio described: **14 Dec, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **5 Jan, 7:30pm**
Bristol Hippodrome
Audio described: **1 Feb, 7:30pm**
Captioned: **9 Feb, 7:30pm**
BSL: **20 Feb, 7:30pm**

The Wizard of Oz
Liverpool Empire
BSL: **27 Dec, 7pm**
Captioned: **2 Jan, 7pm**
Audio described: **3 Jan, 7pm**

The Witches
National Theatre, Olivier
BSL: **28 Dec, 7pm; 17 Jan, 1pm**
Audio described: **9 Dec, 1:30pm; 20 Jan, 1:30pm; 24 Jan, 1pm**
Captioned: **14 Dec, 7pm; 17 Jan, 1pm; 24 Jan, 7pm; 27 Jan, 1.30pm**
Sensory adapted: **21 Dec, 7pm**

Our listings cover the period between 30 November 2023 and 25 January 2024 inclusive (and until June 2024 for access listings); all information correct at time of going to press

PHOTOGRAPHY: Deen Van Der Meer



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My Musicals

Double Olivier Award winner **Tracie Bennett,** currently appearing in Here We Are in New York, on putting across a song, playing men and coming full circle with Sondheim

I'm from an age when musicals meant the Golden Age of Technicolor movies and Doris Day, Rock Hudson, Fred Astaire, Judy Garland. My elder sister was into Tommy Steele and all the dancing and the Busby Berkeley stuff, but I was more sporty, more stunt girl-ish. I was a curious kid, but I don't think I ever bought a cast recording. For me it was about swimming and joining the Brownies and doing tap, ballet and jazz – all the hobbies that were offered in the little town church hall.

I went to stage school and got into TV young. And by the time I reached the West End as Ilona in *She Loves Me* [for which she won the first of her two Oliviers], I must have been 32 or something, and I had been following the repertory system, which doesn't exist anymore. But that's how you learned your trade as you would do everything, and that was a joy to me – so I think it's fair to say that I was ready at the time for the West End. And by that I mean commercial money because I was used to no billing and no money!

I love the people from that show to this day. The work itself was just joyous: the choreography was stunning, the direction was brilliant. And I remember things like [the designers] flying over three times from America to give me a fitting: the collars, the lace, shoes that at the time were like £300 which for me was the equivalent to a wage. I was, like, 'The shoes cost how much?'

When I took over as Madame Thénardier in *Les Mis* [in 2006], that was interesting because you learn how these big machines work and, bless, you don't ask too many questions. That's how it is. *Hairspray* was great [for which she won her second Olivier in 2008 as Velma] because that was the show's first outing in London. But throughout, it's never been about the voice with me, it's about the acting. I'm not so much a singer as a 'putter-across'-er. Just tell stories, as Stephen Sondheim would say, and that's how I think of it.

I remember keeping an eye on Broadway and New York theatre and we would chat about it at drama school – 'Broadway, Broadway' – but we didn't know what it was. I figured it was like the West End, though I've discovered since that it's smaller actually.

I'm back in New York at the moment in Stephen Sondheim's last musical, *Here We Are* [written with David Ives] at The Shed in Hudson Yards. I got the availability check a long time ago but they wouldn't talk about it: I was told it was just a project. It seemed that Joe [Mantello, the director] had seen me in *Follies*, so it was in their minds then to do this, but I didn't know at the time. So there I was one night in London at 11pm looking at my fireplace and the phone rang and it was Joe and he started talking, and I thought, 'Hang on, sorry, love, I didn't hear you. Are you saying I got the thing? No one's told me. Are you actually offering me Sondheim's last show on a Saturday night?' Honestly, I cried for about two weeks – and couldn't tell anybody. Here I was, having done my first musical, a Sondheim, with *Merrily We Roll Along* [the European premiere in Manchester in 1984], finding myself in his last one. For somebody from where I grew up [in Lancashire], it was like 'who'd-a thunk it?' My life had come full circle.

> **I don't tend to think of roles I want to do – as you get older there aren't many left**

When I first started doing Sondheim, I remember being pleased that I had some knowledge already of music – Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Chopin. That awareness of the classics stood me in good stead with musicals without me knowing. When I played Mary in *Merrily*, I remember sight-reading 'Now You Know' and feeling bad for going, 'I can hear it in the music: the discordance, the chromatics, the jazz element – they all came together for me.'

When I later did his show *Saturday Night*, he came over to England and it was a masterclass, literally. He loved actors because they interpret him, and it doesn't matter if the voice cracks. I used to give myself a hard time during one show or another for not hitting the note, but then you learn to say, 'This is what it is.'

I don't tend to think in terms of roles I want to do, and as you get older there aren't many left. My peer group wants the quirky composers and the sung-throughs and the *Dear Evan Hansens*, but I'm not that and no one's thrown those shows at me anyway. I like the old Broadway stuff and the MGM musicals of the sort that no one can afford to do anymore. And when I did JB Biggley at Southwark Playhouse in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, I discovered a whole new career playing men: I'm more of a Sweeney, I guess, than a Mrs Lovett, and I'll always have a go. People get quite reverential about the work but I just think I have nothing to lose, really – you have to go with the flow. M

As told to Matt Wolf

Here We Are plays at The Shed, New York, until 21 January – see our review on page 63; for tickets, visit theshed.org

My must-have recording

APPLAUSE

ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST (1970)

DECCA

I love old-style musicals like *Mame* and this one, which is based on *All About Eve* and stars Lauren Bacall. I remember singing the title number and the lyric, 'What is it that we're living for': it's such a celebration of the theatre. This song makes me think: 'What are we doing it for if not the audience?' I want them to have a nice time, and that's who I work for; I don't do it for me.

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